Wood Cow Chronicles

# Helga
## Out of Hedgelands

Rick Johnson

# Helga: Out of Hedgelands

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# Helga: Out of Hedgelands

*WOOD COW CHRONICLES*
*VOLUME ONE*

Rick Johnson

Dedicated to Helga's #1 fan:
*"Snethboodt matav lis mavert trooven!"*

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## Shaken and Scattered

- In the End, the Beginning
- Bad Storm Breakin'
- Broken Across the Rocks
- The Order Disturbed
- A Mission Accepted
- Desperate Ridges
- A Fateful Day Dawns
- The Wood Cows Expelled
- Bad Bone Bound for Glory
- Last Night at O'Fallon's Bluff
- Milky Joe
- "You can't stay here, weevils!"
- The Only Possibility
- "My life, I am a Borf!"
- Beyond the High One's Reach
- Casting the Dead Beast's Eye
- Lost Hiker's Delusion
- Night Above the River
- Broken Eye and Slasher Annie
- Cut Up Badly
- Broken Eye Plunges
- Caught in a Tangled Web

## Reunited and Combined

- Where It Came Out, No One Knew
- Eating Grubs and Beetles
- The Power of Enigma
- King Stuppy's Trading Post
- A Certain Cantankerous Wood Cow
- No Jokes About Cougars
- Bad to Worse for Breister
- The Mountain Moves But Stands Still
- "Listen to the Place Inside You"
- Toward the Bone Forest
- In the Path of the Gateless Wolf
- Welcome, Woonyak!
- Slasher Annie Meets WooZan
- In the Bone Forest
- WooSheep Bottoms

Annie and Breister's Search
JanWoo-Corriboo Knows Things
We're Getting Out of Here!
Sailing the Ocean of Dreams
Close on the Trail
An Unbroken Circle of Friends
Stupid Frog Shallows
Annie's Story
A Parting of Ways
Reunited
The Woonyaks Return
WooPeace Airlift
New Scenes for Toshty's Painting
Shipwrecked Sea-beasts
Tokens of Unseen Realms
Wrackshees at the Outer Rings
Into the Voi-Nil
Ice Fall Narrows
Bem Madsoor Introduces Herself
Crossports Slizzer
Between Drowning and Drowned
So There Are Beasts In This Waste!
Christer's Plan
Scrodder's Tattoo
Sn'aker Turncoats
A Prime Lot of Butter
A Likely Tilk Duraow Runner
Cargo for the Butter Dock
Join the Crew of the Daring Dream
A Dragonwacker's Work
A Rebel, an Untamed One
Godgie Stomp
Reginald to the Rescue
Too Much Slug Beer
Wicked's Cove
Borf Raiders
Dragon-Conjurer
The End for Sabre Tusk
Helga and Breister Reunited

**Helbara Freed**
**Let the Future Be as It Will**
**Bem Madsoor In Command**
**A Memorable Feast**
**Epilogue**
**Special Feature: Caravan Dragons**
**Special Feature: The Maggon Dragon**

*Book One*

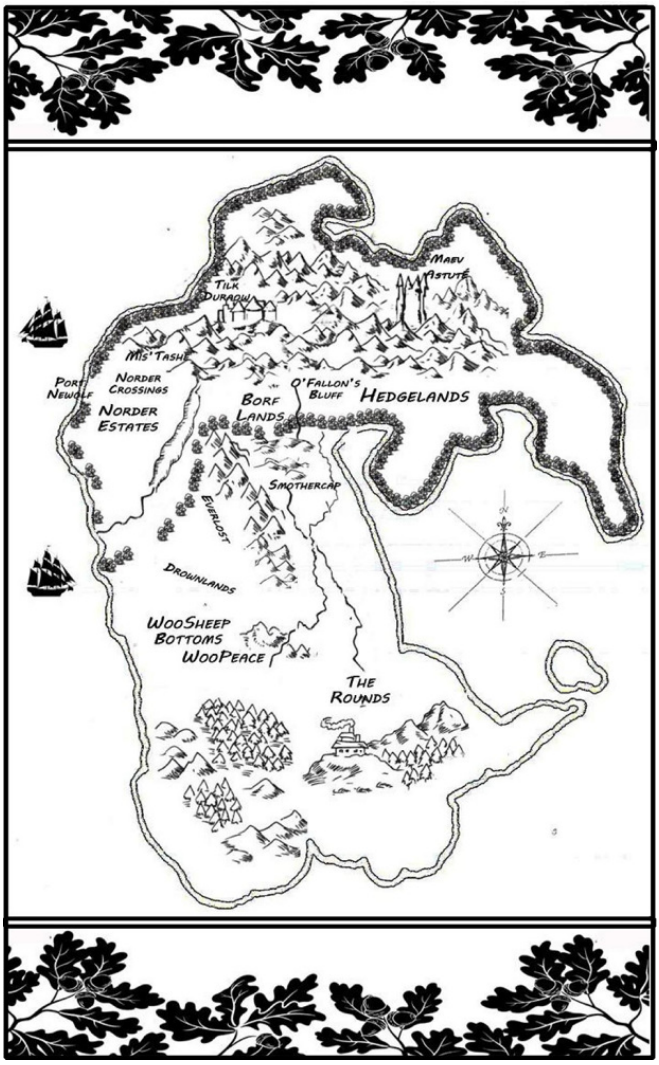
## Shaken and Scattered

*Book Two*

## Reunited and Combined

*Book Three*

## Tokens of Unseen Realms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Maev Astute
Mis'Tashe
Norder Crossings
Port Newolf
Norder Estates
Borf Lands
O'Fallon's Bluff
Hedgelands
Smothercap
Everlost
Drownlands
WooSheep Bottoms
WooPeace
The Rounds

*Book One*
# Shaken and Scattered

## In the End, the Beginning

*Since times long past, Wrackshee slavers stole beasts away into the High One's slavery. Except for the one they missed. Beyond the Forever End, that five-year-old escapee—saved by her mother's sacrifice—was rescued by Roundies and found a new home with them. In future centuries, the ancient story of her miraculous escape and early years in the Rounds would be overshadowed by what came after. An accidental meeting at age twelve, leading her back to her original homeland in the Hedgelands and her long-lost father. And at age fifteen, her exile from the Hedgelands, launching her into a leading role in the unraveling of the age-old tyranny of the High Ones...*

The Drownlands wharf, shrouded in one of its legendary fogs, swirled with activity in the first pale light of dawn. Fish oil lanterns cast a faint, but serviceable, glow through the fog. Swarms of boats and canoes rocked and swayed on mooring ropes along the docks. Odors of musty canvas and damp wood mingled with pungent smells of fish, crayfish, and frogs being unloaded from fishing boats. Traders haggled with peddlers or bet their luck against cardsharps. Coins rattled in the tin cups of vendors hawking frog-fritters and hot Stinger Cider.

On the landside of the wharf, galley beasts in the station house scurried about making breakfast for dockworkers and wayfarers. The aroma of frying catfish, simmering beans and baking cornbread attracted sweaty dock laborers, whooping and hollering as they collapsed into chairs around tables to take a break. A crude Otter ferry

pilot, little used to niceties and finery, lifted his bowl and dribbled the last of his corn mush into his mouth, licking the bowl out with a loud slurping. Wiping his mouth on his coat sleeve, the Otter looked wildly about for a galley beast to bring him more food. Banging his bowl on the table, he roared, "Yawp! Yo, Hollos! Where's ma fish on'a plank? Where's ma muff and crusts? Raise me some Tabasco and galley cheer! Ha! The bell will be tollin' for me afore I'm full, at this rate. Yo, Hollos! Jump it over here!"

The rowdy Otter, howling and hollering to be served, flicked out a sharp skinning knife and sent it flying across the room. THWANNG! The blade buried itself in the timber just above the galley door. "Yawp! Yo, Hollos! That'll be a kindly request for ma galley cheer! Ho! Ho! Ho!" Galley beasts dashed under the quivering blade, rattling plates and bowls as they scrambled to bring him his breakfast.

But the Drownlands wharf—the frontier gateway between the rough Drownlands wilderness and the tidy settlements of the Rounds—was a place of mixing and transitions of many kinds. Not all were rubes and roughnecks. At a quiet table in the corner of the room, a party of travelers calmly finished breakfast and left to catch the running-wagon that was about to leave the station.

Just outside, Livery Rats scrambled to prepare the *Drownlands Weekly* for departure. Travelers loaded quickly as burly Dock Squirrels tossed bags and trunks into the rooftop luggage rack. As soon as the baggage was loaded, the *Weekly* rolled away from the station with creaking timbers and rattling brass, its freshly serviced wheels smelling strongly of snake grease.

Bouncing along the bare track leading away from the Drownlands station, the *Weekly* rumbled through the sparsely settled frontier of the Rounds. Except for the *Weekly* and a few cargo wagons, the bone-jarring road was little used. A river of mud when it rained and a dust-choked washboard of ruts in the dry season, the many stones in the Cutoff road gave its only predictable surface.

Three of the passengers in the *Weekly* on this particular spring day were creatures we will hear much about in this account of former days. There was a strongly muscled young Wood Cow with soft, thick hair and a lively face. Dressed after the manner of her clan—long barkweave jacket and leggings, lizardskin boots, forest green linen shirt—Helga dozed fitfully, her head lolling against the jostling headboard. Although exhausted by her long journey, a smile played across her face. The sound of the rumbling wagon assured her that she was, indeed, coming back to the Rounds after a three year absence.

Helga's father, called Breister, bounced and swayed beside her. He had strong proportions, but was somewhat short for a Wood Cow, being barely taller than his daughter. His broad-brimmed hat, tilted

forward, hid his face somewhat. The bushy beard and long tangled hair flowing over his shoulders somehow seemed to amplify the keen, proud look in his eyes. Peering out from under his hat brim, he watched the countryside passing outside the window.

Leaning against Breister sat a powerfully built female Wood Cow. Fine lines and strong features gave her face a handsome look and ample hair spilled out from under her hat. Her eyes were astonishingly black, like polished obsidian, but with red flecks sparkling within them. A spirit of pugnacious determination seemed to be written everywhere in her manner, even as a kindly smile betrayed the softness of her heart. This was Helbara, Helga's mother.

As the running-wagon proceeded, little by little Breister noticed more and more creatures gathering, lining the road on both sides. Farmers, laborers, shopkeepers, peddlers and traders, old and young—Roundies of every size and age crowded the roadways, surging around the running-wagon, shouting their welcome to Helga.

"He-ho, Helga! Mampta-He-O! Jurrah!"

On every side, there were cheers and shouts of greeting. Knowing that news of Helga's exploits had likely preceded them, Breister had expected a warm welcome for Helga, but nothing like this.

"What's going on?" Helga asked, blinking sleep from her eyes.

"Look!" Helbara pointed. "In the name of the Ancients, see what's happening."

The running-wagon gradually came to a stop amidst the immense crowd surging around it, blocking the road. Dismounting, Helga climbed to the top of the luggage rack where she could see her friends more fully. Taking off her wide-brimmed hat, she waved it high over her head in greeting. As her eyes scanned across the welcoming crowd, she caught sight of old friends. Memories of her earlier life in the Rounds flashed through her mind...

There was Mianney Mayoyo; her two pet lizards perched on her shoulder. A tough and wild-eyed River Cat, Mianney lived alone in a shack perched high on poles in the Deep Springs River. Thought to be half-savage, with strange-smelling smokes always drifting from her cabin, some avoided Mianney. But despite her fierce appearance and hermit-like ways, many called her a healer. To Helga she was a savior. Ten years before, Mianney had wakened in the middle of the night to the loud shouts of two Trapper Dogs. They had found five-year-old Helga, sobbing and lost, thrashing through the shallows near Mianney's shack.

Standing behind Mianney was Picaroo "Pickles" DiArdo—one of the Trapper Dogs that had pulled Helga from the river that night ten years before. It was almost surprising for Helga to see him standing in the crowd. Pickles nearly lived in the long birch bark canoe with the

high vaulted prow that he and his partner, Lupes Lupinio, used for travel in the backwoods, checking their snake traps. Helga remembered the smell of the cool, damp canoe bottom where she sat among the musty-sweet bales of snakeskins. She remembered Pickles' long brown arms, scarred from poisonous snakebites he had survived, paddling the canoe with a gentle rocking of his shoulders. He still wore the loosely tied kerchief around his neck, and was even more a bushy mass of whiskers than Helga had remembered.

"Ra-Zoo, Helga! Huncha to mi round!" The shout was from Neppy Perquat, her old friend from school days. Helga smiled as she recalled staying with Neppy and his family when she first arrived in the Rounds. Such kindness they had shown: the flatcakes for breakfast...the Old Bunge accent in the family's speech, so unusual in the Rounds...the bright red carpet bag Neppy's mother gave Helga to carry her things in when she left the Perquat's to move in with the Abblegurt's who adopted her.

Even Miss Edna Note, Helga's old flute teacher, who had never been satisfied with Helga's playing on the pronghorn flute, was among those welcoming Helga home. Pausing at the edge of the crowd, the graying Badger waited as if uncertain whether Helga would notice her. Helga, however, immediately recognized the figure in the familiar brightly flowered calico dress and matching bonnet. Wrinkled and thin, but still vigorous, Miss Note waved softly at Helga as their eyes met.

Helga smiled as she returned her old teacher's gaze. Under that gaze, however, Helga's eyes filled with tears, altering her sight. Through her blurred vision she seemed to see Miss Note playing her flute far away...ten years before...

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Tangled snags of fallen trees and debris littered the riverbank. Floating along, exhausted, half-submerged, with her five-year-old daughter, Helga, clinging to her back, Helbara stopped to rest a moment. Remaining low in the water, she pulled herself in among the dense reeds and willows surrounding a fallen tree. Except for the soft gurgling of the Deep Springs River—its water colored bronze in the light of the orange moon overhead—the warm night was ominously quiet. Struggling to control the harsh rasping of her ragged breathing, Helbara knew she could not rest long. "Help us, Ancient Ones," she breathed, as the glint of moonlight caught on more and more points of polished metal rounding the riverbend not more than a hundred yards away. Her mind worked in frantic desperation as she watched what almost seemed to be clouds of

ghostly fireflies approaching from up the river.

She hardly had time to think, however, before Helga's grip on her neck tightened. Their pursuers were drawing near. "Snake-bloods, Mama! Now what?" her daughter whispered urgently.

"Shee'wheet, Helga, Shee'wheet," Helbara hissed. "Yes, I see them. The Wrackshees will soon be here. Be still. Ever so quiet."

Six heavily-armed Wrackshees, kneeling in individual kayaks made of tightly-woven reeds, paddled silently toward them. The once-faint outlines of the Wrackshee slave hunters steadily grew more distinct as they approached. Their beeline course on the wide river seemed to be zeroing in on Helbara's hiding place. She realized she could not risk further movement above water—the Wrackshees were now too close.

Shaking the reeds as little as possible, she pulled herself and Helga further back among the reeds until only small cracks were left to peer through. Sensing Helga's rising terror, Helbara softly whispered an old lullaby, trying to calm her: "Shee'wheet, Sweet-Leaf, Shee'wheet...Shee'wheet, Sweet-Leaf..."

Her own heart banging in her chest, Helbara watched the Wrackshee kayaks approaching relentlessly. Moonlight clearly revealed the albino Wolf in the lead kayak—small in stature, abnormally flattened face, thick-necked, with a large moustache. She shuddered. Six kayaks. One Wolf and five Weasels. Somewhere behind them, many more. If she and Helga were discovered, what resistance could they offer?

Suddenly the kayaks slowed, pausing about twenty yards away —close enough that the Wrackshees' awful stench covered the area with a suffocating blanket. Using only hand signals to communicate, the slavers silently peered here and there for any sign of their prey.

The razor-sharp tips of dozens of small throwing lances, carried on bandoliers slung over the Wrackshees' shoulders, shone red in the moonlight. Helbara knew that terrible things happened to beasts hit by those poisoned tips—going mad with thirst, eyes bugging, bleeding the color of grass. Each time the gaze of a Wrackshee seemed to fix on the spot where they were concealed, Helbara trembled on the edge of panicked flight. To do so, however, would mean certain capture or death. They were trapped. With every ounce of inner strength, Helbara held her panic in check.

"Shee'wheet, Helga, Shee'wheet...We must be very still. Do not say anything unless I ask you to." As she uttered these words, she attempted to shift Helga's weight on her back and slipped on the loose sand. Her boot seemed to suddenly drop into a hole. Catching

herself before she made a complete fall, she feared the Weasels might have observed her misstep. For the moment, however, their pursuers seemed to be absorbed in their sign language consultation.

Moving her boot gently, Helbara explored the apparent hole where she had stumbled. The opening was large—the submerged end of a long-decaying fallen tree. In the moonlight, Helbara's eyes struggled to see evidence of the rest of the tree. The dense reeds and willows made it difficult to be certain, but the position of the hollow end she had discovered seemed connected to a massive upended root clump visible further down the bank. How much of the tree was hollow?

"Sweet-Leaf," Helbara whispered very softly, "I need you to explore something for me. Slide quietly off my back, take a deep breath, and duck underwater—see if you can tell if this tree beside us is hollow." The request immediately dampened Helga's fear. Action was an antidote to terror. As quietly as the reeds waved in the soft evening breeze, she disappeared below the surface.

In a few moments she was back. "Not hollow very far," she whispered, "but there's a big opening at first. Then the hollow part ends, but there's a hole in the bark at the end that's above water. It's small but a beast could breathe there." Pausing and looking deeply into her mother's eyes, she concluded with a tone of sorrow, "But only room for a small beast."

As she listened to her daughter's report, a plan rapidly formed in Helbara's mind. It was none too soon. The albino Wrackshee made a quick sign with his paw. The gesture was at the same time purposeful and sinister. The Weasels were no longer waiting. Two of the kayaks turned and glided directly toward the Wood Cows' hiding place. Pressing her daughter close to her chest in a comforting embrace, Helbara calmly gave Helga instructions.

"The hollow space in the tree is large enough," she said, "to conceal you well for some time. The Wrackshees will not likely think to look there for you. They may not even know you escaped with me. I want you to quietly—just as quietly as you did before—duck under again and hide in the hollow space in the tree. Be absolutely quiet no matter what happens."

Helga immediately understood she was being asked to play a serious game of hide-n-seek with their pursuers. Long moments seemed to drag by. There had been no mention of what her mother planned to do.

Then Helbara urged Helga underwater and whispered, "Sweet-Leaf, Mamma's going to talk to those Snake-bloods to make certain they don't harm you. You wait in that hollow place and stay as quiet as you can." She gave Helga a squeeze and handed her a

pronghorn flute she had played for her back in their home. “Take this, Sweet-Leaf, it’s my promise that I’ll be back.” Helga’s eyes met her mother’s in a deeply moving, but silent, farewell as she slipped the flute in her pocket.

How long Helga remained hidden, she didn’t know. When anxiety and loneliness became too much to bear, she cautiously emerged from the hollow tree. Finding the river silent and empty, she struggled to keep her terror in check. Her eyes filled with tears, and for several moments, she she stood silently, her lips trembling. Then she wiped her eyes, pushed her fear aside, and began sloshing miserably through the river shallows. Where she was going, she did not know. She only knew that she must move on.

Then, the silhouette of a large canoe filled her misted vision, looming before the same young Helga, who was now sloshing miserably through the river shallows during the deepest dark of the night.

A beast crouched low in the canoe grabbed her with long, brawny arms. Captured in the strong grasp of this unknown powerful stranger, Helga’s sense of panic surged. In a desperate effort to escape, she was almost ready to bite the beast that held her, when the whisper of a gruff voice stopped her struggles.

“Hey-hey, ya lee’tle Bungeet! Stop da chop sputter, or those Wracker’mugs will b’a back at ya ’gin frighter t’en ever. Shee’wheet...”

The softly whispered “Shee’wheet” calmed Helga. The gentle, soothing tones, so like her mother, marked this rough stranger with a kindly manner that made her feel safe. Settling the small Wood Cow in the bottom of the canoe, her rescuer—Pickles DiArdo as she later learned—continued his soft soothing lullaby and patted her gently on the back in assurance of safety, as his partner began paddling again.

“This’n Bungeet’s had some stinkin’ Wracker’mugs b’itin at her,” Pickles said to the other Trapper Dog paddling in the prow. “Go for Mianney’s, Lupes—the Healer will s’nd her pain t’way.”

The canoe traveled about another two hundred yards and turned into a small, nearly invisible side channel flowing into the main river course from among the willows. Paddling with gentle determination against the current, the canoe glided toward a rough shack perched high above the water on stout poles. Giving one final hard push with their paddles, the Trapper Dogs bent low as the canoe glided under a dense thicket of wild thorn trees growing around the shack. The thorns, tough as steel and with points so sharp and fine they made marvelous sewing needles, ringed the cabin like sentries. No one would attempt to approach the shack

through such ferocious thorns except those invited to come and shown the way to pass.

The thorns did not deter Pickles and Lupes, who often visited Mianney Mayoyo. Tying their canoe to one of the thorn trees, Lupes unrolled a bark mat and threw it up over the lowest branch of the tree. Using the mat for safe passage over the outermost thorns, the three travelers reached the interior of the tree where they were able to drop to the ground. Branches on the rear of this particular tree had been trimmed away to allow exit to the shack.

They had hardly reached Mianney's shack and called out to her when she was instantly with them. The old River Cat, who was rumored to be ancient—some said she had always lived—had long, jet black hair that was smooth and shining from the walnut oil she rubbed into it each day. Dangling far down in front of her was an ornate necklace of beads, and on each wrist she had broad woven bracelets, decorated with copper sunbursts.

Mianney carried a small basket. Without any word of greeting to her visitors, she pulled a bundle of dried herbs and two green-colored balls of thorn tree pitch from the basket. Arranging the herbs and pitch balls in a ceremonious pile before them, with seeming magic she produced a glowing coal from her jacket pocket and lit the pile. A sudden burst of flame, and the herbs and pitch balls sent up a sharp pillar of fire.

As the small fire flamed, Mianney's deep brown eyes darted here and there gleefully. Her bubbling wild intensity frightened some superstitious people, who said she was a demon in disguise. Mianney did seem to do things that were supernatural. The flames that burned so furiously for a few moments, suddenly died down, leaving a dense pungent cloud of smoke. Still without speaking, with lightning quickness Mianney lifted Helga to her arms and ascended the ladder to her shack. In the blink of an eye she and Helga were gone. A wisp of pungent smoke, swirling where Mianney had stood, was all that assured Pickles and Lupes that she had actually been with them a moment before...

As Mianney held Helga close through that long-ago night, flute music, rising and falling from a more distant cabin—belonging to Edna Note—was a safe and soothing sound in the dark.

That flute music—so comforting, such a balm on her terror—was, for Helga, a symbol of her deliverance. The peaceful imprint of the flute melody wafting to her during the darkest part of the night struck Helga in the heart as powerfully as the shafts of yellow sunlight that illumined Mianney Mayoyo's shack the next morning. It was as if her mother's promise to return soon had been fulfilled.

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Now, as the memories from ten years before faded, the sight of Miss Note, graying and bent, sent shivers down Helga's spine. A powerful instinct of the heart urged Helga to quickly push through the crowd, hurrying to see Miss Note. The stooped old Badger, her face still hearty and strong, greeted Helga gleefully.

"Helga, Helga, Helga...Look at you," Edna smiled, her eyes tearing with joy, clasping Helga in a tight embrace. "Even my eyes that are not what they used to be can see that you are changed. You are no longer the wild rapscallion that aged me beyond my years." The elderly music teacher laughed, continuing to hold Helga by the shoulders, gazing intently at her as if seeing something in Helga that eyes were not needed to see.

"Miss Note, I'm truly sorry..."Helga began. "I never meant..."

"...Never meant to put mice in my longhornphone...or to smear my flute with snake grease...or to call me 'Old Lady Sqawkbeak'?" Edna smiled. "You know, of course, that now I laugh about all those old torments..I'm so happy you've returned while I can still greet you." Travelers have brought us news of you. Everyone is so excited. Sareth and Elbin are waiting for you over by the Perquat's wagon, and there are lots of other folk over at the Commons. I couldn't wait to see you, so Neppy helped me get through the crowd. We've heard some amazing stories...can it all be true? There must be time for you to tell us everything."

Helga stepped back and looked at Miss Note fondly. "It seems strange, as I think about it, Miss Note," she began. "I've seen unbelievable things and been terrified for my life. I can hardly believe what has happened to me. But, as strange as it seems, my greatest adventures were within myself."

Helga paused, looking embarrassed. "I was going through some confusing times when I used to torment you. Somehow, although everyone was kind, I didn't seem to fit in anywhere. I felt so strange. That's why I left the Rounds. When I met the Lynx who knew my father, I just had to go."

"You've changed since I last saw you, Helga," Edna observed.

Helga paused, looking off into the distance as if again seeing something there. "My story is not my own, Miss Note," she said. "In my mind I see so many friends who are not here and able to tell the part they had in my adventures. My story is actually many stories. As I tell it, it may sound like one story, but it is really many stories that cross each other. Creatures that I will never know have had a hand in my story and I in theirs. So, you'll have to forgive me as I tell my story...I don't know it all myself."

The elderly Badger smiled. She bent down and picked up a tuft of grass and some dirt. Giving some to Helga, she put some in her own pocket also. The rest she tossed up in the wind. “That’s the way our stories are, Helga—many people have a piece of it, and the story carries on in directions we never know.”

# Bad Storm Breakin'

A few months before Helga's triumphant return to the Rounds, her brother, Emil, went on a journey which was to have profound consequences for her story…

"Bad storm breakin'," Emil thought, as dark purple clouds swept down off the mountains and spatters of rain began to fall. The storm came up so quickly that Emil had not even noticed the piles of clouds gathering in the distance. Now the flying clouds were overhead and thunder rumbled. CRAAACK! A fork of lightning flashed, striking a towering tree along the path just ahead. Splitting down the trunk, the largest part of the tree fell across the path, forcing him to climb clumsily through the wreckage as the branches lashed in the wind.

"Crutt!" he grunted into the rising wind. "Worse than bad, this storm's goin' to tear things up before it's done!" Holding his hat tightly on his head, he leaned forward against the powerful gusts tearing at his coat. Caught in the open, with no hope of immediate relief, Emil battled a sense of dismal foreboding.

"Yar!" he muttered after a few moments of self-pity. "Whether bad or not, you only find it in the end—so I better keep going! Struggling to pick up his pace, he knew the worst was yet to come. Everything beyond the line of low-hanging clouds was disappearing behind sheets of rain. Grimly determined, Emil pushed forward. When the full force of the storm hit, however, he was completely unprepared for the blinding chaos that engulfed him.

A howling north wind sent blinding sheets of rain whirling around him like a curtain. Briefly considering the possibility of seeking shelter, he decided against it. "No, there's no good stopping place. Nothing to do but keep moving, I'll not be ruined by water and it will soon pass." Splashing forward through the deepening puddles on the road, Emil pulled at his hat brim trying to keep the rain from his eyes. The wild, swirling downpour made it nearly impossible to find his way. His shoulders bobbed up and down as he trudged on along the road, moving more by the feel of the path beneath his feet than by sight. Ear-splitting thunder and searing bolts of lightning would have sent most beasts flying under any available cover, but Emil did not fear or falter.

With a pocket full of coins earned from delivering his family's goods to market, he could not dally. "If there's to be pike and biscuits on the table tonight, I've got to stop at the grocer's on the way home —there's been enough of potatoes and greens this week!" Beyond the desire to leave off the hated greens, he'd also promised Helga he would buy some of their father's favorite peppermints for his birthday. "Got to keep going—dawdling in pity won't keep me any drier."

In spite of this resolve, however, Emil had to struggle mightily as he pushed on through the desolate, rain-swept landscape. He still had a long way to go. The journey to the Z-House was a long day's trip even under the best conditions. The Wood Cow settlement at O'Fallon's Bluff was far removed from the other Hedgie villages. No respectable Hedgie wanted to live near the despicable outcasts.

Although practically every Hedgie owned a finely-made oaken chest, ash-handled tool, willow bow, pine bed, or other Wood Cow-made item, Hedgies would not trade directly with the Wood Cows. "Keep the Wood Cows off a bit, but their products near" was the Hedgie view of things. That meant a long journey to the Z-House for the Wood Cows, where a Z-Tax collector distributed the goods they made. Wood Cow tools and furniture sold well. Sometimes Emil and other young Wood Cows took several wagonloads a week to the Z-House. Yet, because of the fearsome taxes on everything they sold, Wood Cows sold much, but earned little.

On this particular day, which so changed Emil's life, he had made an extra trip to the Z-House to deliver a stave made especially for one of the High One's officers. The few extra coins from the special sale meant the difference between pike and greens for dinner, and would put sweet peppermints in his Papa's mouth. The trip had been worth it.

But now he was caught on a lonely stretch of road far from home, in the worst storm he had ever seen. Worse, the road to O'Fallon's Bluff was a no-beast's-land. For a long way, there was no hope of a friendly face or a warm hearth, and his situation was getting worse. When he reached Overmutt Hollow, the road was completely flooded and he was forced to find a detour. It was going to be a long and difficult journey home.

As he headed off the road to circle around the flooding, he tried to remember the times he and his sister had picked blueberries in the Hollow. "Somewhere there's a turn," he thought, squinting his eyes against the blinding rain. "Where is that old path—there's a place where you slip down a slope and you're at Overmutt Bridge. It seems to me there was a big cracked boulder that marked the way." Emil looked here and there as he struggled along, hoping at each step he'd find the landmark showing where to return to the main road. Slogging

on through the fierce storm, the miserable young Wood Cow wandered along, hoping to see something familiar.

Blundering in the driving rain, however, Emil passed by the anticipated landmark and wandered further and further into unfamiliar territory. Soon he was seriously lost. As the afternoon dragged on with no change in his situation, he decided to seek help. The Hedgelands air always carried a mountain chill and the rain felt like an icy bath. Soaked to the bone, the young Wood Cow clenched his jaws against the growing urge to tremble with cold.

He was angry with himself: "Crutt! How stupid I have been. Running here and there like a leaf blown by the wind! Bah—well, I'm completely lost, that much is clear. My first task is to find out where I am. After that, it will be a long backtrack to get on course again. Surely there must be somewhere to ask directions!" he thought.

With renewed resolve, the beleaguered young beast slogged forward with a sense of increasing urgency. He could no longer afford to wander aimlessly through unknown country, hoping to find his way. With night soon to fall, shelter was essential. He no longer hoped to make it home before dark. The dream of a dinner of pike and biscuits was now a distant, forgotten hope. With dismal prospects before him, it would be extremely dangerous to stay outdoors much longer.

Holding his pack over his head to shield his face from the driving rain, Emil marched on for perhaps an hour. Then, above the endlessly drumming rain, something new caught his attention. First, there was a sound of lively music, mingled with loud laughter and cursing, and then a building gradually emerged from the rain.

His wandering had at last cut across a main road. A wide path opened just a bit ahead of him. Although the pathway was soundly made with stone, as Emil approached it he had to cross a sea of mud. Hurrying toward the first sign of shelter he had seen, he flailed and floundered through knee-deep muck. Stumbling along, the laughter he heard coming from the building annoyed him. "Yar! You'd think they'd take pity on such a miserable beast as myself—laughin' and carryin' on in the dry and warm. Ah well, they don't know a raving mud-beast is heading for their door!"

Pulling himself onto the solid stone pathway, Emil ran quickly to the door of what was plainly a roadside inn: *The Three Jolly Climbers*.

Reaching the door of the inn, Emil halted. Over the door was painted:

*On the Way to Maev Astuté*
*a Last Good Meal, Good Beasts, and Tea,*
*With Kind Merriment by Horse Doobutt.*

“Warn me mother!” Emil thought. “I’ve blundered onto the Climber’s Way.” No Wood Cow ever ventured near the Climber’s Way. Everyone knew that. The Climber’s Way was the road leading to the place where the ascent to *Maev Astuté* began. Most Hedgies completed the climb to *Maev Astuté* as an act of honor and duty to their homeland. But not the Wood Cows. They found everything about *Maev Astuté* disgusting and had long ago refused the climb on principle. No Wood Cow would choose to walk the Climber’s Way.

Nevertheless, here he was stumbling along half-drowned, ready to take any possible refuge. Streaming with muddy water and trembling with cold, Emil opened the door and went inside. The stormy night seemed to push him through the door with a particularly fierce gust of wind and rain.

Once inside, he became instantly alert. He didn’t like what he saw. The entrance door opened into a large public room filled with beasts of every description. Although cheery candles burned here and there on wall sconces, and a warm fire blazed in the hearth, there was a distinct coolness in the air. The remains of a large meal rested on platters piled high on a counter. Around the room beasts lounged back in chairs—they had been talking, playing cards, and generally enjoying themselves. That is, until Emil entered the room. In an instant the jovial talk stopped, all eyes now fixed on him. Conversation froze in mid-sentence, there was absolute silence, no beast even twitched.

The stares trained in his direction were not inviting. Three or four Digger Hogs sat drinking Mud Slops and peeling boiled turtle eggs—tossing the shells on the floor as they ate. They were tattooed, filthy, steel-skinned beasts, with rippling muscles and angry eyes; wearing the iron and canvas overalls of the digging trade. One of the Digger Hogs half-rose from his chair; a clear warning to Emil to come no closer. Emil stopped. Even a strongly built Wood Cow—who was afraid of nothing—would not fight just to be fighting.

“It’s a Zanuck, don’t you know!” the innkeeper called out as Emil entered through the door. A tall Horse, wearing a clean linen cap, the innkeeper was strongly muscular, with arms bulging beneath the tight-fitting sleeves of his shirt as he balanced a heavy serving tray loaded with mugs and plates. A pencil-thin mustache and small pointed beard under the chin added to his look of unfriendly welcome.

“Come in, traveler,” the innkeeper continued. “There’s still room for another guest,” he smirked, looking knowingly about the room. “Here’s a guest for us, friends! A Zanuck who, like all of them, does not know enough to come in out the rain—Har! Har! Har!” A chorus of mocking welcomes greeted Emil. “He-Ho, Zanuck, I knew you had mud for brains, but I didn’t know you wore it too! Har! Har”

“I’ll shake the water from my clothes and continue on, if you can’t be civil beasts,” Emil replied, shaking the water roughly off his coat in all directions. Seeing the innkeeper’s angry look as the water flew everywhere, and that a burly Woodchuck was fingering a knife stuck in his belt, Emil continued with a warning: “and don’t trouble me if you’re smart; I carry a fully-loaded temper which could go off easily—it’s done so before now—and that could make it dangerous for a foolish beast who thinks I’m only a young Wood Cow. I warn you not to lay hands on me.”

“Do you threaten me in my own inn?” the Horse shouted angrily.

“I don’t believe in threats!” Emil retorted. “If I state my intention, it’s a promise—and my intention is merely to ask for a civil innkeeper and a bed for the night. I mean you no harm and will fight only for my own safety. Beyond that, I impose on you only to the extent of paying for a bed. Now, if you please, do you have a room?”

“Why, sure, I’ve got a room,” the innkeeper smiled slyly. “What with the storm, we’re pretty full tonight, but for a fine young Zanuck, why we have plenty of room. Har! Har! Har!”

The innkeeper walked over to a door with a pompous strut that made all the beasts in the room—except Emil—laugh heartily. Bowing low, he swung open the door, inviting Emil to go through. “Just drop your two best pieces of silver on the table as you pass, my friend—you can keep the coppers!”

“And now, my dear mud-brain,” the innkeeper proclaimed in mock respect, “let me conduct you to the luxurious room reserved especially for Zanucks.”

Feeling certain that he would be given the most miserable space in the house, Emil nevertheless followed, too wet and cold to care where he slept. Carrying a sputtering candle, the innkeeper conducted him along a long, dark passageway. Opening a second door, the roaring storm blew in rain once again. Sniggering, the innkeeper pointed to a dilapidated barn, barely discernable through the driving rain.

“There you go Zanuck,” a nice room for you. “And you’ll find some company there—a Poolytuck’s already settled down there for the night. Now get yourself out of my inn, the rain is soakin’ my boots and floodin’ the hallway! The barn will be a fine place for a mud-brained idiot like yourself!”

Saying nothing, Emil waded hurriedly across the flooded, muddy ground to the barn. Pushing the door open, he peered into the gloomy, musty-smelling building. A constant stream of drips pattered here and there from the badly leaking roof, leaving much of the floor covered in puddles.

“Ya-Chooo! Wheeez-Zooo!” The feeble sneeze revealed the location of a Moose reclining on a rough bed of burlap bags laid across some

planks resting on a couple of barrels. The crude bed was set up in a corner of the barn where the roof did not leak.

Splashing across the wet, muddy floor to the small scrap of dry space, his eyes scanned the motionless body curled tightly under a scant covering of bags. In the dim light, he could make out the poor beast's body shivering with cold, as his breath wheezed out a nearly continuous stream of faint sneezes.

Bone-weary and hungry, the miserable Wood Cow knew the sorry condition of his roommate had to be his first priority. Having nothing that was truly dry, Emil ripped a few dry boards off the wall of the barn. Using a bit of dry straw he found and the flint he always carried, he soon got a decent small fire going in the tiny dry corner of the barn. The old barn had a fine high roof that allowed the smoke to rise and be sucked out through the holes left by missing timbers. The fire burned nicely and gradually the small corner of safety became warmer.

At first, the Moose did not respond to Emil's presence. Little by little, the warmth of the fire raised Emil's spirits and seemed to steady his companion's breathing. Finding dry boards here and there in the barn, Emil tore them down and broke them into splintered pieces for burning. Soon he had enough to assure a decent fire through the night. Then he took off his drenched outer clothing and hung it to dry near the fire.

He had just settled down in his underclothes before the fire, trying to warm some food and drink from his pack, when his long-silent companion spoke: "Well, look at me, sleeping like a piece o' timber—but nothing wrong that a little warmth and a friendly snip of toast won't cure! Not much wrong with my appetite, but my nose is still a bit out o' sorts—Ya-chooo!"

Emil chuckled, feeling relief that the Moose was showing signs of improvement. To his delight, the elderly Moose suddenly sat up, grinning at him with a silly, toothless smile. In the light of the fire, the Moose's slender form cast a slight shadow on the wall, seeming like a blowing cobweb in the flickering light. He was really just a sliver of a beast, Emil thought; the obvious vigor and strength of earlier years now gone. A ragged beard hung from his grizzled, wrinkled face, which was lit by two brightly gleaming, deeply-set eyes. His head was shaved to a stubble.

"Well," the Moose began, "I'll be as silly as I was born to be in a few hours. A pint of cupper and a snip of toast would put spine in my spirit. Any chance of that, my wibble?" Before Emil could reply, a violent fit of wheezing overtook the old Moose and he fell back on his bed. "Acht," he gasped, wheezing for breath. "I'll need more than a pint of cupper and toast to make the climb."

“Make the climb?” Emil asked incredulously. “You can’t be a climber—you climb to *Maev Astuté?* You’re in no shape to be going on that cursed climb! Just you drop your bag of guts and drool right back on that bed and let me warm up some food and drink for us.”

“A Poolytuck’s not got many choices when it comes to the climb, y’know,” the old Moose wheezed as Emil pulled a tin jug from his pack. “I’ve got to climb, die, or live like a dead beast. There’s few places to die in peace for an old Poolytuck with no family to fall back on—might’s as well freeze up solid on the stairs. At least that way’s no one says I’d be a cowardly beast, set only on comfort.”

“Comfort!” Emil grimaced. “Why you’re barely a breath of air and a threadbare sheet of fur. Yar! There’ll be no climbin’ for you, old spot! I won’t allow it. I’d rather freeze on the stairs myself. You’ll be a dead beast before you take ten steps up there on the mountain. Nar, you won’t be climbin’—I’ll see to that.”

Emil said nothing more for a time, although his thoughts whirled with fury. Twisting the wide cap off his water jug, he emptied the stale water out in a puddle on the floor. Then he walked over and held the jug under one of the streams of rain water coming through the roof. The patter of rain filling the jug soothed his nerves. “Yar,” he thought to himself, “that Moose won’t be climbin’ that cursed mountain—not so long as I’ve got breath.”

When the jug was half-full, Emil carried it back over by the fire. Reaching into his pack he pulled out the soggy remains of a barley loaf. A dripping mass of gummy flour was all that was left of what had once been a fine fresh loaf. Emil chuckled as he tore the soggy mess into bits and put them in the jug of water, then held the jug out over the fire with a pitchfolk he found leaning against the wall.

“There we go, old spot. We’ll just have our hot food and drink as a single batch—call it Innkeeper’s Best and I wager it’ll be no better or worse than the soup he serves to the regular guests!”

The old Moose laughed, and could not help sitting back up as he said with great ceremony, “Ah, yes, Mr. E, the bread could not be more ruined if we had drug it behind us in the rain. It’s a putrid mess, or rather has a certain look of moldy beauty that cannot but be a gift to the belly of any beast already close to death!” With a dramatic flourish, the Moose collapsed back on the bed howling: “He-He-Ho, Yabbo-Zee! I’m dead…No, I’m faint…No, I’m sick o’ the head and my liver’s black as pitch and my name is not a word to be spoken by a sane beast! He-He-He-Ho! Quick! Salt and proper peas for me!”

The wild words of the old Moose left Emil uncertain if his companion were acting or delirious.

The Moose fell silent and looked sternly at Emil. “So, is the gruel ready yet? Surely you’re not going to starve a poor old Poolytuck are

you?"

Chuckling good-naturedly, Emil said, "Wait just a bit, you old faker. You're not so thin as to die before it boils."

Soon each one was taking swallows of the red-hot gruel, straight from the jug. The famished beasts literally bolted the steaming liquid down, grinning from ear to ear, tears streaming down their faces from smoke getting in their eyes as they huddled by the fire.

Later, the rain tapered off; at last the storm was passing. Emil and the Moose, who was known as LeftWit-70114, sat around swapping stories. Neither beast had mentioned the climb to *Maev Astuté,* although the subject had not left Emil's mind since he had heard that the Moose intended to make the climb.

Since Wood Cows refused to draw lottery numbers, Emil had no climbing date attached to his name. He liked that. It was a slight comfort to remain aloof from the *Maev Astuté* project, which he despised.

*Maev Astuté* was more than the ancestral home of the High Ones, the Hedgeland's royal family. It was also a royal tomb, with each of the High Ones buried in the castle. It was believed that by this means, they each would one day become gods. Construction of the fantastic castle never ended. Continuing generation after generation, the castle rose higher into the sky. With the reign of each new High One, *Maev Astuté* rose more sharply into the sky as a new level was added. Each level served as the home of the High One and his royal court. When he died he was buried in a magnificent burial chamber on his level. The life work of each Hedgeland monarch was to build a new level, to serve as the home and tomb of the succeeding High One.

The great construction project had begun in the barely remembered times before even the Forever End was planted. Ancient traditions told of a day when the great castle spire would be "forever visible." In that day, *Maev Astuté* would so dominate the skies that "the heavens themselves would be but vassals of the High Ones." The line of High Ones would form an unbroken link between the earth and the very heavens themselves. On the day the great castle became "forever visible" the line of High Ones would be divinely reborn and they would return to rule the earth. For loyal Hedgies, the sight of *Maev Astuté* year-by-year rising into the sky was a promise of future glory. On clear days, the fantastic castle sparkled brilliantly in the sun, its highly-polished white marble a dazzling spark of light high above everything else. Inexorably it climbed higher and higher into the heavens.

While a few Hedgies might complain about the brutal conditions of the climb—as they went skulking in the shadows, muttering under their breath—everyone knew that complaining about the climb was at

best bad manners, and at worst, dangerous.

Wood Cows did not complain—they simply refused to go. The price of that refusal was to confirm the Wood Cows' status as social outcasts, despised and cut off from every social benefit and every esteemed profession. In the eyes of most Hedgies, Wood Cows were Zanuck—"fly droppings" in Kinshy—and treated with contempt. In the Hedgie world, there was nothing lower and more contemptible than one who refused the sacred climb.

Just slightly above the Zanuck were the Poolytuck—"sitters" or "loafers"—beasts who did not oppose the climb but were too old or weak to undertake the ordeal. Being unable to climb to *Maev Astuté* was a great humiliation. Although allowed to choose a stand-in, only the weakest Poolytuck did so. Mockery and indignities of every sort were heaped upon the Poolytucks. Accepting this humiliating treatment was better, however, than the alternative that awaited any Poolytuck who dared complain about the taunts and unchallenged cheating of merchants against them. The fate of those Poolytucks was to be carried up the mountain by the Royal Patrol and heaved into a deep glacier crevasse.

"It's a miserable night, and a black life, friend," LeftWit-70114 wheezed as if a he had only a teaspoon of air to spare for an entire sentence. "Yet, tomorrow I begin the sacred climb."

"Aye, it's a night not favorable for any beast," Emil agreed. "But tomorrow you'll not be on the mountain," he continued. "You're hardly fit to lift a mug. Tomorrow, you'll be walking in the sun toward O'Fallon's Bluff, carrying my pack and coins back to my father and sister. I'll be climbing the mountain in your place." Emil's tone, his look, his words—all expressed a resolute recklessness that would not be turned aside. "I will climb for you, as one of the stand-ins that even the cruelty of the High One allows for a Poolytuck. You will go to O'Fallon's Bluff and finish my duty to my family. You can rest there until you recover your health."

And so it was that Emil found himself on the sacred climb—and turned the entire Wood Cow way of life on its head...

# Broken Across the Rocks

FoRoar-2036 gasped for breath, struggling to climb the steps in the biting cold. Every muscle in his body protested. He was too tired to go on. Every sense told him he was too weak to continue. Yet, still he went on, his breath shooting out in great white clouds. Gasps of moist breath, instantly shock-frozen into icy puffs, marked his progress. He clutched his sacred stone tightly to his chest. The heavy stone made it hard to keep his balance on the ice-covered stairway, worn to a slippery gloss by the constant pad of reed-boots passing over the ice.

"Can't walk...any...further...AIEYYA!..."

FoRoar-2036 hesitated in confusion, wondering in his semi-frozen stupor if the fearful scream was his own. Too late, he tried to grasp the cloak of the Hedgie walking in front of him. Clutching vainly after the flapping folds of his friend, he watched helplessly as SaRimm-2036 collapsed from cold and exhaustion, and pitched sideways off into the abyss. FoRoar-2036's eyes filled with icy tears, but he kept walking. He had no choice. Barely inches separated one stair-climber from another in a line that stretched for miles in both directions. Step, step, step—the stair-climbers endlessly moved up the stairway toward the castle, *Maev Astuté,* each bearing his or her own sacred stone. To stop in such a line, on such a narrow and treacherous stair, with no guardrail or helper except one's own courage, could mean that dozens might stumble and pitch off into the abyss. The line could not stop—no matter what.

"SaRimm-2036...my old friend, my dear brother...if I return home, I will tell of your sacrifice. It will not be forgotten. You will be remembered as a hero of the Crowning Glory." FoRoar-2036 had seen many such falls during his climb to *Maev Astuté*. Never, however, had he lost a close friend. No matter how many pitched off into the abyss, the climb up the long, winding stairway went on without pause. Mechanically, like a great, living machine, the endless line of stair-climbers carried stones to be used in the construction of *Maev Astuté*. The great event in the life of every Hedgelands dweller, all were called upon to make the sacred climb on a designated day in their lives.

Chosen by lottery at birth, the date of the sacred climb became part of the name of each creature. FoRoar-2036 and SaRimm-2036 both

had the same climbing date. They had begun the sacred climb 20 years, 3 days, and 6 hours after their birth. What was unusual, and considered a great blessing, was that the two creatures drew the exact same climbing date and also had exactly the same birth time.

Although FoRoar-2036 was high born—a Glazier Dog, while SaRimm-2036 was a commoner—a Mining Goat, they had always been close. Their shared destiny had bonded them like brothers since childhood. The sacred climb was the only place in Hedgelands society where high and low could mingle. Young and old, male and female, sick and strong, rich and poor, all were called upon to carry stones to build the great, unfinished castle. Regardless of season, the line of stair-climbers endlessly ascended the stairway to *Maev Astuté.*

Braving howling winds, risking avalanches that swept dozens off the stairs, and struggling through ice and deep snow, the sacred climb was an ordeal of a special order. Even in summer, much of the ascent occurred above the snow line on Star's Door Peak. The ancient stairway wound its way across narrow footbridges swinging over deep chasms, cut steeply up its seemingly endless slopes, and crossed glaciers—hugging the mountain until it began to mount the castle spires of *Maev Astuté*. Carrying stones to build the castle was the most difficult and trying event in the life of every Hedgie.

Since being a wee pup, his parents had trained FoRoar-2036 to look forward to the climb as the most glorious event in his life. "In the climb," they had told him, "you give yourself to the Crowning Glory of the Hedgelands—*Maev Astuté*—the greatest work of our folk, and symbol of our glory." Glazier Dogs made the precision glass lenses for the High One's telescopes and, thus, had a relatively high station in Hedgelands society. Yet, even so, FoRoar-2036 could attain no station grander than that of a Hedgie who helped to build *Maev Astuté.* Even the lowest classes were accorded respect for completing this duty.

The sacred climb held the promise of eternal glory. "You will be the one-hundredth of an unbroken line in our clan to make the sacred climb without a death on the stairs. This rare achievement will make you one of the great heroes. Your name will live forever in our histories. Our clan will gain a high place in the spirit world because of your deed." FoRoar-2036 now repeated these words over and over, urgently. His numbness and exhaustion were only held back by this promise of bringing eternal honor to his clan. He must go on. Stamping crusted ice off his boots as best he could, he pulled his cloak tighter against the cold and shuffled on. SaRimm-2036 would be remembered for his sacrifice on behalf of the Crowning Glory, but FoRoar-2036 was determined to not only be remembered, but to gain eternal honor for his clan.

In Kinshy, the ancient tongue of the first High Ones, the castle was

*Maev Astuté,* (Our Crown). The first High Ones began construction of the great castle. Many Hedgie commoners, however, called it *Mae Vasuté,* (My Steps in Agony). The play on words was more than an odd coincidence. Rising like a jagged needle from the summit of Star's Door Peak, *Maev Astuté* had a shadowed place in Hedgeland lore, as its commoner name suggested.

Not all Hedgies felt affection for the project, as FoRoar-2036 was reminded by the grumbling comments of a creature in line behind him.

"Yar, you fat-faced bullies," a Wood Cow named Emil muttered under his breath as two members of the High One's Royal Patrol passed. Although the climbers were packed together in line, another narrow lane ran along beside the climbers. This lane was reserved exclusively for the High One's Royal Patrols. Others were forbidden to set foot in it. The Royal Patrols moved up and down the line, tossing those unable to continue off the edge. The harsh discipline was effective. The line kept moving.

The Royal Patrol stopped a few paces ahead. Emil shuddered as he looked over the Patrol. Skull Buzzards, recruited especially for their harsh and heartless manners, made up the elite Patrols. The fiendish Buzzards were not Hedgies. Not trusting Hedgies to guard him and enforce his will, the High One recruited Skull Buzzard mercenaries from distant Crags. Infamous for their cruelty to those in trouble, the High Ones found them perfect for service in the Royal Patrols.

Emil's eyes happened to meet those of the Skull Buzzard who wore the gold-braid insignia of a commander on the collar of his uniform. The Patrol leader's face was thin and pale, his feathers grizzled, his eyes bloodshot. Deep, darkly-wrinkled folds of skin hung loosely in great pockets around his neck. Otherwise, Emil could see little of the Skull Buzzard's body. The heavy winter uniform, issued for service above the snow line, was buttoned up tight against the cold. It covered so much of the body, with so many layers of weighty fabric, that the Buzzard walked stiffly.

An old Coyote had collapsed on the stairs, but had not fallen over the edge. He lay moaning piteously in the frigid wind. Uncontrollable shudders convulsed his body.

"There now, none of your whining shrieks here, Mr. Coyote, be off to your ancestors! It's past your time! Come! There you go!" The large burly Skull Buzzards rolled the unfortunate Coyote toward the edge of the stairs with their boots.

Even in such dire circumstances, the line of climbers was not allowed to halt. Shuffling along in the line, Emil moved forward toward the spot where the Royal Patrol Buzzards were kicking the poor Coyote, who was now weakly begging for mercy.

“No, No, you lazy dog,” cried one of the Skull Buzzards, stomping his boot on the poor creature’s paw, which was grasping frantically to keep from sliding into the abyss. “The High Ones did not provide this Crowning Glory for you to whimper and complain! Arise and climb if you have worth. Go to your ancestors if you have none.”

The Skull Buzzard commander raised his boot to give one more decisive kick to the fallen Coyote, when Emil, passing by in the line of climbers, stepped out of line and cried ‘No!’ in a voice that echoed even above the howling wind.

“What?” roared the Royal Patrol Commander, turning savagely round.

“No!” Emil thundered again, stepping forward into the forbidden Royal Patrol lane. “I command you to stop.”

“Stop?” cried the Skull Buzzard, with a derisive sneer.

“Yes!” shouted Emil.

Puzzled and confused by the unexpected opposition, the Royal Patrol Commander stepped back from the whimpering Coyote, giving his challenger a frightful look.

“Leave him alone!” repeated Emil, moving forward to protect the Coyote. “I will not allow you to torment and kill this helpless creature. I defy you. Touch him at your own peril. But I give you quarter if you leave him to me, which is better for all.”

The Royal Patrol Commander continued to gaze upon Emil, his eyes narrowed in dangerous hatred and contempt. But traces of confusion and astonishment also flickered across his face. A Royal Patrol had never before been challenged.

“Leave this poor wretch to my care,” Emil said. “You have shown no qualities that lead me to believe you know how to care for anyone. Leave him to me. I will carry him to shelter.”

“Get back in line!” screamed the Skull Buzzard, almost beside himself with rage. At the same time, he seized the Coyote, who had crawled somewhat back from the edge, and pulled him back.

“Yar, you greasy-beaked thugs, touch him at your own risk!” thundered Emil fiercely. “I will not stand by and see it done. I have courage enough to send you to your ancestors! See if you dare to test the determination of a Wood Cow!”

“What is this,” sneered the Royal Patrol Commander, “the lowest, most despised and contemptible scum of the Hedgelands speaks of courage? Please forgive me if I laugh.” The Skull Buzzard’s laugh, however, was noticeably hollow. He clearly did not know what to make of his surprisingly determined challenger.

“Your cruelties give me no reason to pity you,” Emil roared, springing upon the Royal Patrol Commander, knocking him soundly across the eyes with a powerful blow from the whole of his lower arm.

The blow carried the concentrated force, in one instant, of all the rage that many Hedgies had long felt toward the High One and his Patrols.

The Royal Patrol Commander crumpled, unconscious, falling toward the edge of the yawning abyss. His companion leaped toward him, striving to halt his fall from the sheer cliffs of Star's Door Peak.

Grabbing his companion tightly, struggling to halt the inevitable, the second Royal Patrol Buzzard too late realized that he, too, was sliding toward the edge. "TEEEAAAAH!" The long shriek sounded as the two members of the Royal Patrol fell, locked in embrace, to the rocks below. Even a powerful Skull Buzzard could not use his powers of flight in the heavy winter uniforms of the Royal Patrol.

The climbers all along the line halted simultaneously, as if a single thought surged through each creature at the same instant. They moved not—the first occasion in the 'remembered times' when the stair-climbing line had halted.

"Yar, you fat-faced thugs of *Mae Vasuté*!" Emil bellowed loudly, sending a final insult after the defeated Royal Patrol. Heaving and shaking with rage, he screamed into the wide emptiness into which the Royal Patrol had plummeted. "You'll not be tossin' any other fine creatures over the edge! You're going to tell 'em you're sorry—face-to-face!" Leaping full-force, Emil stamped on the Royal Patrol Commander's hat, which had fallen off in Emil's violent attack. Then he gave it a ferocious kick over the side of the stair.

"Yar, you miserable yellow-eyed brutes! You'll not be forcing these poor creatures to shuffle mindlessly up the stairs, carrying rocks to build a castle that's already too big for any good purpose!" Emil shouted, lost in his frenzied rant. At last, remembering his fallen friend, Emil knelt by the Coyote to attend to his needs. Finding barely a pulse, Emil gently picked the Coyote up in his brawny arms. Turning in the opposite direction of the climbing line, Emil stepped into the Royal Patrol lane—making his rebellion complete—and began carrying his friend back down the mountain.

A deep hush fell over the climbers. A creature had attacked the Royal Patrols. Two of the High One's elite officers lay broken across the rocks far below. It was unprecedented. The High One would be very disturbed about this.

# The Order Disturbed

Fropperdaft Hafful TaTerribee VIII, Ancient Order of Reprehense, 3rd Degree; Lord Reckoner of Heights; Most Eminent Swellhead of the Keepers; Baron Sheriff of the Forever End; Peerless Berzerker of the Crowning Glory; Grandee of *Maev Astuté*; and High One of all Hedgelands; was wealthy in the things of the world and a creature of the world's thoughts. He fancied himself a philosopher, astronomer, inventor, merchant, and monarch without equal.

A big, loud Wolf, with a haunting emptiness in his eyes—as if he were always deeply drugged—a metallic, mirthless laugh constantly accented his speech. He loved the finest brocades and velvets, yet was rarely seen in fine clothes. A tyrant without peer, his dungeons were eternally full. Behind the vacant look in his eyes was a brilliantly inventive mind. Often he solved wildly complex problems so rapidly that his thoughts were far ahead of his words. This was the reason for the apparent emptiness in his eyes—his mind was far beyond the present moment. At any given time, the High One's thoughts might be entirely unrelated to what was actually happening around him.

The Throne Room of *Maev Astuté* reflected this quality of Fropperdaft. A spacious room atop a high tower of the castle, the Throne Room was unlike any other seat of royal power. From floor to ceiling the room was perfectly jumbled with books, ledgers, piles of parchment scrolls, and tools of all kinds. Pipes and hoses ran here, there and everywhere. Pieces of iron, piles of coal, and wood shavings covered much of the floor. A large fire burned in a massive circular fireplace in the center of the room. Open on four sides and supported at the corners with sturdy stone columns, the fireplace was attached to a massive bellows. Heavy hammers, a large anvil, tongs and other tools for working red-hot metal were arrayed around the fireplace. The purpose of the fire was more than warmth—it was a metalworking forge.

Although the Throne Room of *Maev Astuté* was mostly a combination of library, blacksmith forge, and workshop, it did also have a throne. Near the high windows at one side, a high golden throne served as the symbolic seat of royal authority. But, as often as not, Fropperdaft met visitors and held audiences while he continued tinkering on his inventions and experiments. His royal robes and

crown usually hung askew on a hook in the corner, while the High One worked in baggy oil-spattered dungarees and a huge blacksmith's apron. New visitors to the High One were wide-eyed in wonder when they first saw such an unorthodox Throne Room. But the whispered jokes and titterings had no effect on Fropperdaft. With sparks flying as he hammered red-hot metal and the bellows working loudly, visitors often had to yell to be heard as they consulted with the High One about important affairs of state. Fropperdaft's mind was elsewhere than the day-to-day, mundane affairs of his realm.

How different was his brother. A year or two younger than his royal sibling, Colonel Snart looked older and wiser, perhaps only because the craftiness and intelligence in his eyes looked more promising. Unlike the long, wildly-curling hair worn by the High One, Colonel Snart had a short-clipped military haircut. He spoke with the affable good humor of a creature well-used to the ways of the world. The differences between the two were summed up by the food and drink they consumed as they talked. Fropperdaft ate nothing but the finest cheese and sweets that money could buy, and liked Rotter Wine by the glass. The Colonel took what he could get, where he could get it, but always refused to "eat better than my troops." As he stood toasting a slice of mackerel sausage on a long fork over the fire, taking deep swigs of Frog's Belch Ale from a pewter pot, two more unlikely brothers could not be imagined.

Their differences were nowhere more obvious than in their discussion. Colonel Snart was a military regular of sorts, posted to a remote outpost of the Norder Wolves. Many years ago, as an idealistic young adventurer, he had gone to help defend the Norder Wolves from attack and had stayed and become a citizen. Because of his relation to the High One, and a number of worldly dealers he had met in the course of his duties, Colonel Snart found a natural niche conducting a "tidy little trade," as he termed it, between the Hedgeland and the Estates of the Norder Wolves. He was constantly seeking ways to improve the tidy little trade and was hoping to persuade his royal brother to help him.

"Esteemed brother, you are the High One...your power is without equal. Even more, your mind is greater than all. Why do you insist on wasting your potential? You might buy more cheaply the things you crave, and sell more dearly the things you steal, if you would use your inventiveness to improve our tidy little trade. You have invented a great traveling machine—one such as the world has not before seen. It could carry our commerce easily over the mountains. It would save months of journeying by foot and boat. The riches you have now would be a mere pocket of dust in comparison."

Fropperdaft was not listening. Instead, he was talking non-stop, as

if no one else was speaking. Delivering his observations on the mechanisms and theory of his most recent invention, he strode rapidly around the room, waving his arms wildly as he worked equations in the air and pointed out the details of his invention as he saw them in his mind.

"You see, dear Colonel," he said, "the fundamental problem with traditional passenger or cargo balloons is that they are dependent on air currents to move. They move only as fast as the wind and go only where the currents carry them. But, I have invented a balloon that does not depend on the winds! With a very precise boost at launch and a continuing source of propulsion, the balloon can be steered wherever the pilot wishes." Giving the bellows a mighty squeeze for emphasis, a shower of sparks shot off of the forge onto the stone floor directly in front of Colonel Snart.

Then he continued. "Adding a bicycular fan-jet to the balloon allows the passenger, with minimum effort, to greatly boost propulsion power. The jets can be manipulated to enable precise control and steering—even in strong winds!" His metallic voice became even more loud and harsh: "With this bicycular balloon, the construction of *Maev Astuté* will accelerate. Stones will fly up to the castle by the dozens with the aid or my invention. *Maev Astuté* will ascend into the heavens rapidly. I will be the greatest builder of all the High Ones. Why should *Maev Astuté* crawl into the skies, one level at a time? I will finish *Maev Astuté*! Erelong I will be a god!"

"Yes! Yes!" Colonel Snart exclaimed, "Your bicycular balloon will be the invention of the age! It will revolutionize travel. But don't waste it on building *Maev Astuté*! Let it carry the tidy little trade...We both will be wealthy beyond any dream we have ever had. I will send you as many additional slaves as you need to build *Maev Astuté*. The work can continue as it always has. But let me use the bicycular balloon for the tidy little trade."

The High One gave another powerful squeeze to the bellows sending another shower of sparks around Colonel Snart's feet. "You see, dear Colonel," he replied, "trade cannot compete with divinity. A god no longer craves fine cheese. I will build the glory of *Maev Astuté*! What other High Ones have labored for over centuries, I will exceed a thousandfold."

Walking over to a set of double doors, Fropperdaft continued, "Behind these doors is my finest invention. You will be the first to see it." Opening the double doors, he revealed a sleek bicycle with several silver metal cylinders attached behind and below the seat.

"Notice, dear Colonel, that this unique machine looks like an ordinary bicycle. However, looks are deceiving. When a rider mounts the machine and pushes forward, this bicycular balloon slides onto a

launcher that accelerates the machine to a high speed. Then, at precisely the moment it reaches maximum velocity, it shoots out of the castle through an automatic door. It flies into open air and the balloon inflates. The boost of the launch, with speed added by the rider peddling the fan-jet mechanism, propels and steers my airborne wonder! If my calculations are correct, my bicycular balloon will easily lift a full-load of stones and steer through the fierce and unpredictable mountain winds. With many of my new machines, *Maev Astuté* will be finished rapidly."

The High One looked majestically at Colonel Snart. "Soon, you will see..." His words were broken off by the sudden entry of a Royal Patrol detachment. They were escorting a Wood Cow who was obviously their prisoner. The Wood Cow carried a frail and unconscious Coyote over his shoulders. The Skull Buzzard wearing a commander's insignia stepped toward the High One and whispered in his ear. Fropperdaft's face became pale for an instant, but then took on a harsh scowl. He was shaking with rage.

"You! Wood Cow! Drop to your knees and lick my boots right now, or die! How dare you disrupt the sacred climb! You have killed a Royal Patrol! No insult like this has ever occurred before in all the ages of the Hedgelands. Drop to your knees and grovel! Beg for mercy! Lick my boots! Plead for your life!" The High One stormed on and on in a very bad temper, his voice rising to a higher and higher screech. The more he screeched and ranted, the less he seemed actually to be present. The shock of such an unparalleled affront seemed to have sent him into a blind rage.

For his part, Emil said nothing, but his mind was racing. While Fropperdaft screeched, becoming less and less aware of what was happening, Emil surveyed escape possibilities. The Royal Patrol guards were agog, never having seen such a spectacular show of bad temper. Their watchfulness was not sharp, Emil noted.

Only Colonel Snart seemed to have his wits about him, watching Emil's every move. He seemed to sense that the Wood Cow was dangerously clever and brave.

Emil spoke softly into the Coyote's ear: "OK, old fellow, don't worry. It's going to get a little rough for a few moments, but with the help of the Ancient Ones, we'll be out of here in a jiffy." The unconscious Coyote did not reply.

In one swift movement, Emil suddenly tossed the Coyote off his shoulders and, with a single mighty heave, sent the poor creature sailing directly into Colonel Snart's face. The startled colonel had no time to react as the body of the Coyote hit him full force, knocking him backward toward the forge. Staggering backward, Colonel Snart reached to break his fall and put both his paws directly onto the red-

hot coals of the forge.

"YEOOOOWWW!" Colonel Snart howled and leaped away from the forge holding his burned paws. In the same instant, Emil scooped up the Coyote once again. Holding the poor creature tightly under his arm, he dashed toward the open double doors where the bicycle was parked.

The sudden commotion brought the Royal Patrol back to their duty. "Grab him," the Skull Buzzard commander yelled. "Stop him! Don't let him get away!"

But it was too late. Emil threw himself on the seat of the High One's bicycle—as he supposed it to be—and pushed off, hoping to escape. He succeeded beyond his wildest imagination. With the Coyote draped over his shoulder, Emil had the ride of his life. The High One's bicycular balloon worked perfectly. Launched with exactly the velocity Fropperdaft had calculated, and peddling furiously, Emil and the Coyote sailed high over the Don'ot Stumb Mountains.

For days following all these unparalleled events, the High One secluded himself in his Throne Room. The Hedgeland folk were anxiously watchful. What would the High One do? The sacred climb had been disturbed. A Royal Patrol had been attacked and killed. Rumors flew that the same Wood Cow had brazenly attacked the High One's brother within the Throne Room of *Maev Astuté* and escaped with the most precious possession of the High One. Something awful would surely be coming out of *Maev Astuté*. But what?

# A Mission Accepted

Fropperdaft was annoyed. He was groping about on the floor for a screw he had dropped. It was the third time he had dropped the same screw. As he crept about trying to find it, he banged his head on the underside of his workbench. OUCH! It was the second time. He felt a headache coming on. The morning had not gone well. Earlier he had broken a bolt off as he tightened it. Another bolt had stripped its threads. A gear tooth had snapped off. He seemed to be all thumbs. What a day! Very annoying.

It was all the fault of that insolent Wood Cow that had upset him. An attack on one Royal Patrol with Skull Buzzards dead. An attack on another Royal Patrol within the confines of his very own Throne Room! An attack on his brother. Stealing his most prized invention and escaping. Such things could not be contemplated. It was too astonishing for words. It gave him a headache—even without his other troubles.

But that would soon change. Fropperdaft had decided that historic and urgent actions must be taken to destroy the Wood Cow society once and for all. The upcoming celebration of Clear Water's Day—with its theme of purification and cleanliness—offered a perfect opportunity to cleanse the Hedgelands of the foul odor of the Wood Cows.

From time immemorial, the High Ones had issued a royal proclamation especially for Clear Water's Day. And Fropperdaft had decided that this year's proclamation must be changed. "I must recall the first proclamation I sent and replace it with a new one. Time is short. There is no time to have the proclamations returned to me via Weasel Courier. I will have to call upon the Messenger Jays. That is the only way I can change the proclamation in time for Clear Water's Day. The Jays must carry a message to the Keepers of the Light, directing them to destroy my first proclamation and substitute the new one." The High One smiled malignantly as he considered his plan.

At that moment, he heard the sound of Bad Bone coming up the stairway to the Throne Room. Chain mail boots sounded *swish-luckt...swish-luckt...swish-luckt* on the stairs. No one else wore chain mail boots. It could only be Bad Bone. The High One smiled. He had a job for his friend. Fropperdaft felt happier to think about that. He

chuckled. “Yes, indeed,” he thought with some returning glee, “I have a fine assignment for him.” Reaching to pick up the lost screw, his mind focused on the approaching meeting with Bad Bone. Without thinking where he was, Fropperdaft stood up. CLUNKKK! His head slammed hard into the edge of the workbench. “Bah! Sharant! Blast that Wood Cow,” he fumed.

A moment later, Bad Bone entered the room. An exceptionally large and powerfully-built Climbing Lynx, he wore the traditional deep blue tunic of the Order of a High Peaks Worthy. Fingerless gloves and boots of finely made chain mail completed his dress. He had a reputation as the greatest climber in the Hedgelands. Unlike the rest of the Hedgies who had a climbing date as part of their name, Climbing Lynx had no number. They were trained to climb from birth and were on the stairs to *Maev Astuté* throughout their lives. Scattered through the line of stair climbers, the Climbing Lynx kept the line moving and in step. Their example and exhortation, backed by the terror of the Royal Patrol, kept the stair-climbers in perfect order.

Bad Bone was a special case, however. In his chain mail boots, Bad Bone could swiftly cross even the roughest terrain with great speed. He moved like a speeding shadow. A small grappling hook on a rope was coiled at his belt, and he carried a longbow. He could climb virtually anywhere quickly. For this reason, the High One called on him for special missions of state.

“The Wood Cow has ruined my day, Bad Bone...He’s ruined my work, too. I’ve broken or muddled up every one of my projects since yesterday when that insolent Wood Cow appeared!” Fropperdaft smiled wickedly at Bad Bone. “But, that will be the last time such a thing happens in the Hedgeland, my friend...the last time.”

The High One motioned for Bad Bone to sit down at a chair near him. “Here, my loyal friend,” Fropperdaft offered, “have some cheese and Rotter Wine while we talk.”

Bad Bone tossed his long matted hair out of his face. “I’m very glad to see you, sire, I’m sure. Very pleased, sire.” He took a loaf of cheese and bit a chunk out of it. Chewing slowly, he watched the High One with interest. “Ah-har-har-har! Yes, sire, very pleased!”

“Well, well, my musty old bag of fur,” the High One began, “I hope you feel up to a climb?”

“Fitted with iron in my knees, and fire in my eyes, sire!” the Lynx replied in his deep, hearty voice. The phrase was something of a personal motto. He used it to declare his readiness for anything. It called attention to the fact that nothing would stop him from completing his mission. Bad Bone took great pride in the fact that he truly did have iron fragments embedded in his knees and legs as the result of a cooking explosion in the course of a mission many years

before. The explosion and fire had not stopped him from completing that mission, however, or any other mission. He was as fast and strong as ever. He felt confident in his strength and courage to triumph over any danger, conquer any obstacle, and overcome any trial. There was no one more strong, swift and courageous than Bad Bone.

"Now listen, Bad Bone," Fropperdaft said, "You are to go to the Messenger Jays up on the Desperate Ridges. Deliver this satchel of scrolls to their Keeper of the Light. It is my proclamation. All must hear it. The Jays will distribute the scrolls to all corners of my realm. Go swiftly. No time must be wasted. When you arrive at the Jay's settlement, respect the authority of their Keeper of the Light, kneel before her and do as she may require. Give her this wheel of cheese as my gift. She may keep you waiting. If so, wait patiently. Do all you are asked. Although the Messenger Jays are my subjects, their home is extremely remote. They harm no one, and wish only to be left alone, so I let them do as they will. However, at times I need their assistance. They will help, but they cannot be commanded, nor hurried. You, yourself, must go swiftly and so I charge you to do. But if the Jays require patience, be patient. They are mapmakers and navigators. Their Keeper of the Light is the trustee of maps for my realms. Only the Jays know all the byways of the Hedgelands. With time so short, I must call on them to use every hidden route and little-known shortcut to assure that my proclamation is delivered throughout the land before Clear Water's Day. Without the order of their Keeper of the Light, the other Jays will not deliver my proclamation. You must not offend her."

"Very much my pleasure, sire," Bad Bone replied, "very much my pleasure, to be sure." Bad Bone felt happy. His deep, hearty laughter echoed through the Throne Room as he ate sweets with the High One and they joked about the fools they knew. Bad Bone left his meeting with the High One in good spirits. His belly was full of fine cheese and sweets, and the High One had sent him away with one of the easiest assignments he had ever received.

# Desperate Ridges

Bad Bone pulled himself up over the rocky ledge, relieved that his exhausting climb had ended. The Messenger Jay settlement stretched out before him, a seeming jumble of multi-story tenements built in stairstep fashion. Packed densely together, the redstone buildings seemed to wander along a maze of alleys. Gratefully, he collapsed, breathing heavily, allowing his aching arms and legs to relax.

"Who goes here? Signify! Ya-Ya!" A Messenger Jay wearing a blue uniform with large brass buttons and a tall blue top hat stood before him. The Jay carried a short, stout billyclub hanging at the belt.

"As you please, your ladyship," Bad Bone replied. "I bear a gift from the High One for the Keeper of the Light. If it pleases your ladyship, I bear a gift and papers for delivery."

"Signify, I say," the Jay repeated, "are you deaf?"

"Bengt Massavo, as you please, my lady. Known as Bad Bone for an accident I had once. Climbing Lynx. Royal Mission to the Keeper of the Light and Trustee of Maps. If it pleases your ladyship, a royal gift awaits her pleasure."

"Kiss the good rock upon which you stand, blessed visitor."

Bad Bone complied, grumbling within himself something about "arrogant fool."

"Now that you've shown proper respect for this blessed place," the Jay observed, "go to the public bath and bathe yourself. I will give you directions. Your smell is an affront to the fresh air of this blessed place. I hope I may recover from your odor within hours. Fortunately, my health is good and your smell is only foul and offensive, not dangerous." The Jay turned her head disdainfully away for emphasis, then turned back to Bad Bone and continued. "The furred creatures are always so very smelly; it is really quite disgraceful. Our blessed place long ago resolved that the reeking, putrid odor of the furred creatures had to be specially attended before they could enter our village." The Jay waggled the billyclub at him warningly. "Fortunately, we receive few furred visitors and are well-prepared to handle them when they do come." The Jay reached into one of the large, over-sized pockets of her uniform and produced a bar of soap. "I trust I will not encounter you in the precincts of our blessed citizenry until you have thoroughly bathed, at least twice, with soap! Here,

visitor, use this with the warm compliments of our citizens."

"Is that all? It is not a great deal, that!" Bad Bone replied, battling to hold back his anger. "A small sacrifice to the pleasure of your ladyship. A simple act of kindness I may offer to the citizens of this blessed place. Now, if it pleases my lady, which way to the public bath?" Except for the strength of his will to serve the High One well, he would have throttled the Jay. "This is surely the most pompous fool I have ever seen," he fumed silently to himself. How dare this impudent, arrogant creature insult him in such terms! It was humiliating and should not be permitted. But, remembering his instructions, Bad Bone submitted.

It was the Keeper of the Light who thus instructed Bad Bone, although he did not realize to whom he spoke. The Jay said no more but began to walk leisurely along the edge of the ledge over which he had recently climbed. Back and forth the Jay walked in slow, methodical steps. Back and forth. Back and forth, saying nothing, as if merely enjoying the fresh air. Bad Bone's frustration rose higher and higher. What was going on? Why did the Jay not answer his request for directions to the public bath? After a very long time of simply waiting for a response, he was trembling with rage and frustration. Yet, recalling his mission, and his vows as a High Peaks Worthy to never strike out in anger, he battled to keep control of himself. He dared not show his impatience with his host—no matter how badly he wanted to throttle the fool!

But, even if an outburst was contained, he tingled with pent-up frustration. Trembling, shaking, quivering...Bad Bone's body began to twitch violently. Despite his best efforts to remain calm as he awaited instruction, little by little, his body became one large tremor. The more he struggled to retain his composure, the more he twitched. All the while, the Jay continued to stroll slowly along.

At last, his knees were trembling so uncontrollably that Bad Bone feared he would collapse in a quivering mass of twitching fur. Calling on all the powers of strength and endurance he could muster, he battled to remain upright. With tears gathering in his eyes, the burly Lynx reached deeper for strength than he had ever done before. Even climbing the terribly dangerous cliffs and crags of the Desperate Ridges did not take strength like this. The rising rush of his anger would soon burst out. The release of that rage would feel so good...but it would doom his mission and dishonor his clan. Tears filled Bad Bone's eyes.

"Receive your instructions to bathe, visitor," the Jay said at last.

I can bathe now, your ladyship?" Bad Bone had never felt such a desire for a bath in his life! He hated water. He never bathed. But it now sounded like paradise.

“Yes, visitor, you may bathe.” The Jay gave Bad Bone a deeply probing look. “Do you now wish to take a bath?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, as it pleases my lady!” Bad Bone exclaimed with true enthusiasm.

“I welcome you, visitor. You have gained entry to this blessed place.” The Jay gestured toward the settlement. “The public bath is at the Llanhogger Inn on Orntbeck Street,” she said. “Go and bathe. Then you are to have dinner with the Keeper of the Light. After you bathe, the innkeeper will see that you are conducted to the evening meal—if your odor has subsided by then,” she added with another look from her sharp, probing eyes. Turning to leave, the Jay smiled at Bad Bone, as if she knew a secret that she was not telling. “And don’t be late. The Keeper of the Light does not like to be kept waiting. Make haste! Make haste!”

Bad Bone’s tremors had ceased. He was no longer weeping, and his breathing was beginning to return to normal. But he also knew that his anger and frustration were still not well under control. “Make haste! Make haste! The Keeper of the Light does not like to be kept waiting!” he fumed. “Well, well...isn’t that too bad! As if I wasn’t kept waiting!” He sighed, “All right, your ladyship, if it pleases you...” He trudged off to find the Llanhogger Inn.

When he found the inn, Bad Bone was surprised to see a notice posted at what was obviously the main entry.

**Feathered Entrance Only!**

**Odoriferous Fur Forbidden!**

**Furred Creatures**
**Must Be Hosed Before Entering!**

**Furred Creatures**
**Proceed to the Rear!**

Bad Bone was not amused. He did not like water in the first place. He hated baths. The urgent desire he so recently had to bathe was long gone. But his loyalty to his sovereign was strong. It was humiliating, but sighing deeply, he walked to the rear entrance. “Blessed place, indeed!” he muttered. “It’s a hamlet of arrogant, priggish bigots!”

At the back, he found several Jays lounging on a porch. Some seemed to be snoozing. One was snoring loudly. Others sat idly swatting at gnats that buzzed around their heads.

In addition to the Jays, Bad Bone was astounded to see a long line of furred creatures apparently waiting for something. Hares, Weasels,

Lynx, Mountain Goats, Dogs—all with downcast, despairing looks—and all wearing the deep blue tunics of Worthies! Thin, ragged and listless, it appeared they had been waiting a long time. They looked weak and depressed. What was going on? What had happened to all these powerful Worthies?

*Swish-luckt...swish-luckt...*Bad Bone's boots announced his arrival and things began to happen. The Jays jumped up and began scurrying around, flapping and waving and yelling excitedly. They ran helter-skelter, running into each other, tripping over one another, screaming and shouting as if suddenly gone berserk!

"Stand here!" one yelled at him. "No! Stand there!" another shouted "No! No, you knotheads! He goes over here!" Others tried to push and shove the confused Lynx this way or that. Some pulled him forward. Others pushed him back. All yelled at him in a frenzy!

What was going on? He was completely bewildered. The more they yelled conflicting commands, the angrier Bad Bone felt. With jabbering, screaming Jays all around him, shoving from all directions, Bad Bone wanted to strike out with his strong, muscular arms. He didn't know which way to turn. He wanted to do his own screaming at the idiot Jays. But, once again, he worried that his mission would be lost if he opposed the Jays. So he reserved his strength and tried to wait out the torment.

But the bedlam did not lessen. The Jays continued to push and shove him this way and that, screeching at him to "Stand Here!" or "Stand There!" As time went on, he began to feel himself giving in to his anger and frustration. He once again began to twitch and tremble, as he struggled to keep his surging anger contained. Quivering uncontrollably, Bad Bone closed his eyes, trying to block out the chaos around him. He covered his face to keep the Jays from seeing the tears filling his eyes. Again, his knees began to buckle as he battled to hold himself together. He wanted more than anything to lash out at the Jays. To break their bones...to scatter them to the winds...to scream insults..."Can't do it, can't destroy the mission...," he thought, feeling that his trembling knees must soon give way.

SHOOOSH! SWISH! SPLASH! SHOOSH! When exhaustion seemed about to overwhelm his self-control, a powerful spray of cold water was turned on him. Sputtering under the drenching, the tormented Lynx let out a long, resounding howl of near-maddened joy. The jabbering of the Jays stopped and the shock of the streaming water ended Bad Bone's recent ordeal... "Arrooooooowl! Arrooooooowl!" his howls echoed through the air. Then another hose turned on him, and another, and another. Bad Bone's howls were drowned out as high-pressure water hit him from all sides!

At last, the spraying stopped. Bad Bone dropped to the ground,

completely exhausted, every ounce of strength gone. Shivering in the cool highlands air, he fell into a deep sleep. He had not undermined his mission, nor betrayed his pledge to his sovereign, nor dishonored his clan. He slept with surprising peace.

When he awoke, Bad Bone was seated, dried and neatly combed, in a fine suit of clothes, at a table set with beautiful silver plates, mugs, and tableware. Around the table was a magnificent meal of all manner of delicious foods. How did he get here? How long had he slept sitting upright in his chair? It could have been some time, he realized. The chair was comfortable and had arms and a back that easily supported someone sleeping.

"A creature might get on very well here, visitor," a familiar voice said. It was the Jay he had first met as he entered the settlement. She was now sitting at the table with him. Still in her uniform, the top hat was sitting on the floor next to her chair. She motioned at the delightful spread of delicacies.

"It may not be a bad situation for some..." Bad Bone replied. He was about to go on with an angry complaint about the treatment he had received, but thinking better of it, continued in another vein. "...and the table certainly takes my attention, if it pleases your ladyship."

"I hope you have brought appetite with you?" asked his host.

"If it pleases my lady," Bad Bone replied, "I swear I have not eaten in a long time. I know not how long I have been here."

"A bath seems to sharpen a creature's appetite," the Jay observed. "You may eat as much as you like." Bad Bone attacked the food hungrily.

"You could get along very well here, visitor," the Jay repeated. "You have done well. The Keeper of the Light is pleased. She feels that our blessed settlement has found a new citizen today, if he might wish a change..." She paused, seeing the question in Bad Bone's eyes. "Yes, it is still today. You may be assured that you slept only a couple of hours. You have overcome our defenses with courage and perseverance. You have won our respect!"

"Overcome your defenses?" Bad Bone asked.

"Yes. Did you not feel more challenged, and perhaps more frightened, than ever before? Did you not feel the strongest desire you have ever felt to run away in terror? Were you not near to screaming at the torments you encountered? Did you not need more strength and courage than you realized you had?"

The powerful Lynx looked at the Jay with a flash of understanding on his face.

"Yes," the Jay smiled, "what you experienced was our defensive system." She gazed at him with admiration. "Few visitors ever visit

our settlement. We are too remote. It is too dangerous to reach us. Only the very best climbers can come. Some, such as you, are sent by the High One on missions. Others have heard of our blessed community and wish to join it. Most, as you saw, are High Peaks Worthies who come to test themselves against the Desperate Ridges. Each is an arrogant fool. Each considers himself to be the most courageous climber that ever lived. Their pride inspires them to test themselves against the Desperate Ridges. Only a few ever reach our blessed place. We do not need a great defensive force. However, we deeply value our privacy, and do not wish to be disturbed. We do not want visitors loitering about uselessly. So, we do not welcome visitors warmly, as you noticed." Leaning back in her chair, the Keeper of the Light turned her penetrating glance on Bad Bone.

"You came here like most visitors, convinced that you were extraordinarily courageous. You thought that no one could beat you at anything. All visitors who come here believe that they are strong and brave. But...they have never had to face themselves as their own worst enemy! That is our defense! We make each visitor battle themselves. We want only the most worthy visitors to stay. Only those who can overcome themselves. Most fail in this test. You, however, have done well."

Bad Bone sat quietly, considering what the Jay had said. He now understood what had happened to him, except for one thing. "If it pleases your ladyship," Bad Bone asked, "who were the furred creatures standing in line behind the inn?"

"Ah," the Jay replied, "those are the creatures who are afraid to face themselves. They failed in the first trial and desired to run away, but found they had nowhere to run. Realizing that they could not overcome themselves, they gave way before the fear and weakness that lived within them. Although they climbed up here full of prideful assurance, they no longer have the courage and confidence to climb back down. These contemptible beasts now wait at the back of the inn for scraps from this table each day. They are no trouble to us. They think only of the deliverer they hope will come and rescue them. Such is the nature of most furred creatures," she concluded contemptuously.

Bad Bone looked at the Jay with horror.

"No, no," she laughed. "They are not prisoners. They might leave anytime they wish. But they await some bold creature to rescue them. Alas, there are few such creatures among the furred ones. But, there are the rare ones...Someday, a truly heroic climber will come to our settlement and overcome our defenses. He will receive our offer to stay with contempt and desire to lead these poor, frightened fools back down the mountain to their old life below. Perhaps you are that peerless climber...perhaps not. We shall see. You may have a

delightful life here in our blessed settlement, or you may lead the poor fools back down the mountain. Or, you may decide to leave them as they are.  We shall see. We shall see."

# A Fateful Day Dawns

On Clear Water's Day, the greatest festival of the year, Hedgies rose early and put on their finest clothes. As soon as royal watchers saw the first beam of sunlight over the eastern mountains, a great chorus of trumpets sounded, announcing the start of the festival. Even before that, however, there was little sleep for anyone. The night before Clear Water's Day wee beasts hardly slept a wink:

"Hurry up, Mama! All the Squint Buns will be gone before we even get a chance at them!"

"Now you just hold your ladle, you little whiff! The sun's not even up yet! There's no Squint Buns to be had yet—so you just hold your ladle and wait a bit." And so it went in many homes long before dawn.

Even if some creature managed to sleep through the trumpets, he would surely be wakened by the ringing of every bell and chime in the realm which followed. In any case, once the sun peeked over the eastern mountains, and the trumpets sounded, and the bells rang, every creature poured into the streets. For the next twenty-four hours, every avenue thronged with revelers. Homes and public houses echoed with laughter and song. Dancing, contests of wile and strength, games, and carnivals continued around the clock. Rotter Wine and Frog's Belch Ale flowed freely. And wee beasts devoured small, sweet Squint Buns—a holiday favorite—by the wagonload.

Work was suspended and Hedgies hardly slept. Grabbing naps now and then, eating on the run, barely stopping to change clothes, no one wanted to miss a single moment of the great annual party. Every street was garlanded with bright lights and spectacular streamers.

As the first rays of the sun shone over the eastern mountains, the trumpets and bells called attention to the critical moment when the first rays of morning sun touched the tip of Clear Water Peak. This eagerly anticipated moment—coming 20 minutes after the first sound of trumpets—was marked as archers let fly a volley of a thousand flaming arrows in a grand arc to signal the start of a great procession.

From every corner of every village and town, Hedgies thronged to attend the solemn 'First Touch' ceremony held in the village High Seat. Every town had such town halls, crowned by a soaring pinnacle of stone. At the precise moment the sun's disk first touched the top of

Clear Water Peak at sunrise, the archers' volley of arrows signaled it was time to gather.

From all parts of town the various clans of Hedgies came, rank upon rank, becoming one mighty procession flowing into the High Seat. Coming out from their houses, flooding down the side streets and alleyways into many broad, straight avenues radiating out from the High Seat like the spokes of a wheel. By rank and class the Hedgies chose their particular avenue and made their way to the High Seat.

Innumerable colorful banners hung from every window, happy cart vendors threw fruit from their carts, and here and there wee beasts clung to the branches of trees calling out the names of friends as they passed. As more and more beasts joined the processions streaming toward the High Seat, they were crushed tightly into a richly pungent throng. Strong smells of sweat and breath mixed with odors of perfumed fur, smoldering herbs, and flaming pine oil torches. The intense energy of the different clan processions took on different forms as they moved down their distinctive avenues. Singing and sing-song howling, drums, rattles, bells, clapping and stomping—each procession found its own rhythm.

When the clan processions reached the High Seat, each entered one of the arched entrances that ringed the huge oval building. According to tradition, the first to enter were the Sky Elk, the personal representatives of the High One. Decked out in their ornately embroidered gold and scarlet robes, they matched the huge hall set lavishly with dazzling gold and scarlet tiles. Keepers of the stories of the Ancient Heroes and scholars of the heavens, the Sky Elk triumphantly raised their long ceremonial telescopes in sign of rank as they entered the hall. Hedgies tossed strips of colored cloth or string across the long telescopes as the Sky Elk passed, showing honor to these favorites of the High One. Following the Sky Elk came a long train of dignitaries: Glazier Dogs, Stone Ducks, Climbing Lynx, and so on from the highest classes down to the lowest ones.

As the Sky Elk passed through the great entrance doorway, guards on each side of the doorway dropped to one knee as a sign of respect for the High One, the king whose word was law. Appointed by the 'First One and the Last One' to rule over the Mountain Tops, the line of High Ones stretched into the misty past. By virtue of his rule over the Mountain Tops, the High One was believed to be the very mouthpiece of the Ancient Heroes. The High One, as King of all Hedgeland, appointed Keepers of the Light who ruled each class according to their work. From this principle of rank, the whole of Hedgie society was ordered.

The clan entrances led into a system of corkscrew ramps. The

spiraling ramps allowed huge crowds to enter the High Seat quickly, while keeping the clans separated from each other by rank. Ascending in a series of long winding curves the ramps twined around and around without ever meeting. Walls of translucent stone lined the entrance ramps. Intricate images carved into the stone pulsed with weird, undulating patterns of light. Torchlight behind the translucent stone sent flashing tendrils of light that seemed to make the images move like living things.

As the grand procession filed into the cavernous center of the High Seat, the corkscrew entrance ramps fed the Hedgie clans into their particular level of seating. Each clan was accorded a seat of honor and distinction above the next lower in rank. Sloping steeply downward and away from the center of the Hall, the tiers of seats circled the center like a gigantic inverted cone. From the very center of the cone there rose a cylindrical stone stairway leading to a platform just below the top of the dome.

Among the first dignitaries to enter the High Seat were individuals being accorded special honors. At the very head of the order of dignitaries was a Glazier Dog by the name of FoRoar-2036. Head held high with pride, he marched smartly into the High Seat, receiving honors for his recent history-making completion of the sacred climb.

FoRoar loved the pageantry of the 'First Touch' ceremonies—the pungent smell of incense, the brightly-colored tunics worn by differing clans, the stirring music from the gigantic choir, and the solemn chanting of the Keepers of the Light. He reveled in every bit of the pomp and pageantry. Not to a small extent, he was also pleased to be surrounded by the most distinguished and powerful creatures of the Hedgelands. He had brought the highest honor on himself and his clan. In one of the seating areas reserved for honored guests, his mother wept with pride. His sacrifice for the homeland had been worth it.

FoRoar-2036 let his eyes play across the magnificent translucent carvings that covered the walls of the entrance concourse as he entered the High Seat. The carvings flickered in weird, undulating patterns of light. Yet, whatever the pattern, the carvings captured every bit of light as if it were flame—seeming to pulse with life before FoRoar's sight. His heart beat more rapidly. All the heroic scenes in the majestic story of the Hedgies were recorded in these masterpieces. Each told of the great events and famous heroes in the days when the world was young.

Foremost in FoRoar's mind today was the carving honoring Clear Water. It showed Clear Water coming at a time when the creatures were dying from a terrible, unknown disease. An intricate design portrayed Clear Water as a visionary healer who saw that travelers

were carrying disease into the Hedgelands. Images depicted him turning travelers away and not letting them come again.

To prevent deadly diseases from ever again being brought in from outside, travel was forbidden. A great hedgewall—the Forever End—was planted, and for over a thousand years, it was extended, year-by-year. Trunks and branches of hedge trees were carefully woven together as they grew. It became a 'living wall' impossible to penetrate. The great Hedge ran for thousands of miles—a vast enclosure surrounding the Hedgelands. Once it was completed, travel beyond the Hedge almost completely ceased. FoRoar-2036 honored the work of the forefathers who had so wisely protected the creatures.

"Hear and listen, all Hedgelanders! Hear and listen!" The cry of the Sky Elk herald brought FoRoar-2036 out of his reflections. The ceremony was about to begin.

"Today," the herald went on, "we mark a beautiful milestone in the sun's walk through the heavens. As the sun touches Clear Water Peak, that Ancient Hero's spirit is at home on earth, reminding us of his teachings. Through this annual renewal, the world again is given the gift of rebirth. As the sun moves through all the 'First Touch' Days, each of the gifts of creation is renewed."

Then a great blare of trumpets jarred him back to attention. The herald had finished his speech and the Keepers of the Light, representing all ranks, chanted the ancient verse of loyalty to the High One. Kneeling in front of all those assembled, the Keepers of the Light affirmed their loyalty to the High One:

*When lofty First One, king of the Mountains,*
*and Last One, king of the Creatures,*
*Who rules all that is, Gave the Mountain Tops*
*to the firstborn of the High One, He made Great Peace,*
*When the Mountains quit their shaking,*
*and the Creatures stood and spoke it was so.*
*When in the midst of the Mountains the creatures*
*became One in the High One's Law,*
*The First One and the Last One*
*made Mountains and Creatures one,*
*So the High One rules,*
*As long as the sun touches the High One's realm,*
*He enlightens the Creatures.*
*What Light we have is from Him,*
*and any Light we find,*
*We keep solely by His grace.*

When the chant was complete, the Sky Elk's Keeper of the Light

rose to read the High One's annual Royal Proclamation.

A hush fell over the vast hall. All eyes were fixed on the Sky Elk's Keeper of the Light as he slowly and majestically mounted to the high speaker's platform. No one spoke. Once the Keeper of the Light had begun his climb to the place of honor, it was considered an insult against the High One to speak before the High One's proclamation had been read. The high platform was silhouetted from above by a large starburst of deep red glass tiles illuminated by the only opening to outside light. Unlike the undulating multicolored shimmer of the torchlit entrance ramps, the platform—and whoever stood there—was surrounded by a blazing red glow. The cone arrangement of the tiers of seats placed every beast in a position to look up at the platform—silhouetting the speaker on the platform in the red starburst. It was a stunning sight.

As the Keeper of the Light ascended toward the platform, an organ—used only on this annual occasion—began playing. The high curving ceiling of the High Seat amplified the organ notes into an astonishing musical thunder. The sound rose to an eerie roar as the Keeper of the Light reached the platform. It rattled candleholders, shook doors, and every beast present felt the vibration in his or her chest. The overall effect of music, pageantry, crowding, and light was both mesmerizing and terrifying.

This year there was a special feeling of mystery in the air that had never been present before. Whispers and mutterings said the High One's proclamation would be like no other year. Confused and conflicting rumors flew that for the first time in Hedgelands history, the High One had recalled his proclamation! In the days since the unheard of attack by a rebellious Wood Cow, the High One had been silent. Rumors said that Fropperdaft VIII was preparing some great and drastic punishment for the Wood Cows. But there had been no message or sign of any kind from the royal sovereign. The rumor that the annual proclamation had been recalled was ominous.

By the custom of ages, Weasel Couriers delivered the High One's proclamation to the Keepers of the Light in every village several days in advance of Clear Water's Day. This allowed the Keepers of the Light to know what the proclamation contained and be prepared to implement its message. As always, Weasel Couriers had delivered the proclamation to each Keeper of the Light. But, three days after the proclamation was delivered, the unprecedented attack by the rebel Wood Cow occurred.

The attack shocked and alarmed Fropperdaft to his very core. Such rebellion could not be condoned. The Wood Cows had always been problems. Long ago, the Wood Cows first got into trouble with the High Ones because of their great love for trees. Trouble and hard

feelings arose between Wood Cows and the High Ones because the Wood Cows defended trees from rude treatment or abuse. Most Hedgies considered things growing from the earth to be unclean and contemptible. Since trees had the deepest roots into the earth, they were treated the worst. But Wood Cows, from time immemorial, had refused to burn wood in fires. And they built with wood as if it were a holy act. Wood Cows always *invited* a tree to become a chair or a table or a building. They would never simply go out and cut a tree down. This was a deep affront to the teachings of the High Ones, but it was not the worst of the Wood Cow offenses.

Wood Cows said that they could *hear* the voices of trees—that the trees *talked* to them. Many of the Hedgies, especially from the ruling classes, made jokes about the Wood Cows talking to the trees. Wisecracks abounded.

But, at the same time, everyone, including the High Ones, knew that the Wood Cows were the best carpenters and wood-workers around. Their work was flawless. The wood they used to make tables and chairs was renowned for its quality and beauty. Their workmanship was second to none. They were masters of the woodworking craft.

“How can you expect a tree to give you its best wood, if you do not ask it for help first?” the Wood Cows said. “First invite the tree to help you, and if it agrees, it will give you its very best wood. Self-sacrifice is a noble, essential part of the order of things, but it cannot be forced or taken—self-sacrifice must be freely given. When it is freely given, it bestows the greatest beauty on its purpose. So it is with trees also. Why do you wonder when the wood has cracks and splits? If you treat the tree rudely, this is what you will always get. Listen to the trees and see what beauty lies within them, then invite them to help you. Beauty awaits in that direction only.” Such Wood Cow ‘superstitions’ filled generations of High Ones with fury.

No one knew exactly what the Wood Cows heard when they listened to the trees. “If you have a heart for the trees, and treat them as your friend, they will speak in your ear like a clanging bell!” the Wood Cows said. But the High Ones did not like to hear such things.

To allow such thought would undo the entire order of things. All the highest and best gifts came from above, never from the lower realms. As Fropperdaft VIII considered the case of the rebellious Wood Cow, he saw that it was not just a single case of foolish rebellion that had to be addressed. The entire life and society of the Wood Cows was a threat to the Hedgelands. “Yes,” Fropperdaft said to himself as he contemplated what he would do, “this is not a problem of just one simpleton Wood Cow...the whole worthless lot of them are lazy, superstitious troublemakers.”

Respect for the trees prevented the Wood Cows from participating in community activities such as the annual Willow Bonfire that gave honor to the High One on his birthday. Nor did they participate in the 'sacred climb'—believing it to be injustice in the service of tyranny. Their insistence on inviting the trees to work with them in making a table or chair meant that sometimes it took days for a Wood Cow carpenter to hear a response from a tree. This greatly slowed down any project they did. "Bah, Sharant!" Fropperdaft spat out the curse. "How dare they suggest that trees—the lowest of the low—have voices! They wish us to believe that trees can speak! Bah, Sharant! It will not be tolerated!"

The High One feared that Wood Cow ideas would ultimately lead to great trouble. "It is unthinkable! The only voice from the Unspeaking Realm is from the Mountain Tops. And the only voice from the Mountain Tops is that of the High One. It can be no other way." The suggestion that the Wood Cows heard other voices from the Unspeaking Realm infuriated the High Ones throughout the long ages of the dynasty. As a result, the Hedgies regarded Wood Cows as evil troublemakers.

The age-old condemnation effectively made the Wood Cows social outcasts. Denied all rights to own property within Hedgeland towns, the Wood Cows went off by themselves to live in settlements around O'Fallon's Bluff. There they engaged in woodcrafts in the traditional manner, earning a meager living—they could do nothing else. Ostracized and set apart, for long ages this had been sufficient to the High Ones' purpose. Over the generations, myth and ignorance led to prejudices that turned the Hedgelanders more and more against the Wood Cows. They could neither buy, nor sell, goods at a fair price. Having no rights in Hedgeland society, the Wood Cows carried on their simple life virtually unseen and uncared about by the Hedgies.

But all this changed with the attack by the rebellious Wood Cow. They had always been accused of being troublemakers, but they had never actually created any trouble. The successful attack and escape of the rebel, however, changed that.

Thus, on that fateful Clear Water's Day which had such significance for Helga's story, the long-held prejudice against the Wood Cows brought an event that would forever change the history, not just of the Wood Cows, but also of the Hedgeland itself, and have grave implications for other creatures yet unknown to them.

# The Wood Cows Expelled

On that day so fateful for Helga's story, just before sunrise Messenger Jays set out from their post atop the Desperate Ridges. Each carried a proclamation scroll to be delivered to Keepers of the Light in the far-flung hamlets and villages of the Hedgelands. Bad Bone watched them scattering to the different directions as he prepared to return home. His preparations included exhorting the group of dispirited Worthies he had discovered behind the Llanhogger Inn. He had decided to lead them away from the Jay settlement. The rag-tag collection of creatures gathered around him, chattering excitedly. At last they were leaving the Jays.

As the cries of the departing Messenger Jays—"Ya! Ya! Ya!"—died away, Bad Bone gave one last look at the Jay settlement and, taking a deep breath, climbed over the ledge and began his descent. Calling instructions to those following him, within half an hour he guided the rest of his band over the edge as well.

Speeding swiftly to all corners of the Hedgelands, the Messenger Jays delivered the High One's decree. In each and every Hedgie hamlet and village, the High One's original proclamation was destroyed and replaced with the new message.

When Clear Water's Day arrived, the High Seat in every hamlet and village crackled with an unusual, anxious energy. Each Hedgie had heard the rumors about the High One's annual proclamation. In the light of the unprecedented rebellion, what would His Highness say?

A deep hush fell over Hedgies as the royal proclamation was read:

*Greetings to thee, all!*
*The Hedge stands fast upon the dangers of beyond;*
*it opens not to the West; it opens not to the East;*
*it opens not to the South; it opens not to the North,*
*it opens not to any who would enter our land.*
*The Hedge opens only at the command*
*of the First One and the Last One;*
*it opens for him the foul-smelling Wood Cow;*
*it opens for her the lazy Wood Cow;*
*it opens for the Wood Cows who defy the High One,*
*who speaks for the First One and the Last One.*

*The High One, by whose wisdom*
*the good live and the unworthy die,*
*provides three First Touch Days*
*for the Wood Cows to leave our lands.*
*By the First One and the Last One,*
*who alone is without equal, I decree this shall be*
*a means of purifying our lands and people.*
*Death to anyone who aids the Wood Cows as they flee!*

The Forever End was to be opened! The Wood Cows were expelled from the Hedgelands!

So far as anyone knew, no creature—except for the High One's own favored traders—had been beyond the Hedge in over a thousand years. Even the rivers that flowed through the Hedgelands passed through gates that barred entry by any creature. Now there would be an opening made in the Hedge!

Helga and Breister, with the other Wood Cows, listened to the reading of the proclamation from a dark and dusty cellar of the High Seat where they sat on the floor. Symbolic of their place at the absolute bottom of the Hedgeland order, Wood Cows were not permitted to sit with the other Hedgies. Being confined to the cellar, however, with sound filtering down faintly through vents, had the benefit of allowing them to comment on the ridiculous things they heard.

"'Death to anyone who aids the Wood Cows as they flee!' the High One says," Helga snorted. "Wood Cows would never run away from such a tyrant as the High One! We're not cowards! We'll obey this decree, as unjust and foolish as it is. But we obey without any idea of scurrying away in panic!"

"Aye, that's our way," her father agreed. "If we leave, we go peacefully with the will to make a new life in a new land. We go toward a new day. Let the High One and his ignorant kind hold to the old day, as they will. We go forward with our heads held high!"

# Bad Bone Bound for Glory

The descent from the Desperate Ridges took Bad Bone longer than he expected. He arrived at his home village just as the festivities of Clear Water's Day were drawing to a close. Conducting the group of furred creatures on the difficult route had been slow going. He was shocked to see how much the creatures he led had been degraded by their experience with the Jays. What had once been some of the foremost climbers and adventurers of the Hedgelands were now a bedraggled band of 'scramblers and shriekers' as Bad Bone saw them, scarcely able to move without fear.

He had to constantly shout encouragement to one or another that had suddenly frozen up with fright. "Come on, my stout hearts! There's Salamander Nuggets and Squint Buns a-waiting! There's dancin' and hollerin' in the streets! Frog's Belch Ale for all if we make it back before Clear Water's Day is over!" Little by little, the tiny band made its way down.

Leading the ragged band into the village square, Bad Bone did not expect much of a reception. For him, it was simply another mission completed successfully. But for the families of the furred creatures he had rescued, he was a hero.

Grateful families of the long-lost creatures flocked to meet the new arrivals. Joyful mothers, fathers, siblings and neighbors raised their tankards and mugs to celebrate the return of their loved ones. Surrounded by good company and as happy as could be, Bad Bone abandoned himself to enjoying the fun. Not sparing the Salamander Nuggets and Frog's Belch Ale, he was especially touched when a wee little Lynx, happy to have her older brother returned, offered him her Squint Bun. Bad Bone was very happy.

The festivities went on and on, ever more raucous and spirited. One creature after another offered a toast to Bad Bone's health in honor of a rescued loved-one. Frog's Belch Ale flowed faster and faster. "Here's to Bad Bone, liberator of my own dear Thudwit!" a Fox yelled, raising his mug high. "And here's another for Smidtoker, my long-lost son!" an Otter cried. "Hurrah for Bad Bone!"

Wild singing broke out, with the entire crowd wailing half-tangled verses of a ballad they made up:

*Ho-ho, have you heard the news, me Hedgie?*
*Bad Bone is bound for glory,*
*Ho-ho, hug him and rock him and bowl him over,*
*Bad Bone is bound for glory,*
*Ho-ho, one more day and the High One's a-callin'*
*Bad Bone will be a glory story, glory story—*
*Bad Bone will be a glory story.*

Completely lost in the frenzied celebration, Bad Bone was taken with the sloshing of ale, until something distracted his attention for a moment.

He glimpsed a familiar Wood Cow and her father passing down a side alley just to his left.

"Helga!" Bad Bone shouted after the old friend who had once made him his fine wooden longbow. "Helga! Wait!"

"Hush, old scout!" a Goat standing near Bad Bone muttered, emphasizing the comment with a sharp jab in Bad Bone's ribs. "You don't dare acknowledge the expelled ones."

Until that moment, Bad Bone had not known the content of the proclamation scrolls he carried to the Messenger Jays for delivery. The High One's decree was known only to the Keepers of the Light until it was made public on Clear Water's Day. Bad Bone had not returned in time to hear it read.

"The Wood Cows expelled?" Bad Bone asked the Goat. "How can this be? What have they done? Surely the foolishness of one Wood Cow does not condemn the rest to suffer?"

"Old scout," the Goat replied in a hoarse whisper, "you dare not raise such questions too loudly. It's dangerous. Let it be good enough to be a hero for rescuing these beasts from the Jays. Let the rest of it be as it will!" The Goat's harsh look made Bad Bone grow quiet.

The sudden feelings of shame and sorrow he felt were lost on the Goat and the rest of the happy revelers. Bad Bone, however, no longer joined in the joyful partying with the same gusto as before. His horror at having participated so significantly in a deep wrong against his old friend could not be easily shaken off. Feeling small and weak, as if his great strength was ebbing away, Bad Bone walked slowly away from the revelry, wanting to pour out his tears in private.

# Last Night at O'Fallon's Bluff

*Swish-luckt...swish-luckt...*The unmistakable footsteps on the stone walk outside her cottage made Helga jump for the door. Even before the visitor knocked, she had already flung the door open.

Pulling her friend inside, Helga hurriedly shut the door and turned the lock. "Bad Bone! What are you doing here?" she asked urgently. Her troubled face showed additional signs of worry. "Are you insane? If his High Fropperdaftness knew you were here, your life wouldn't be worth a grain of sand! We are officially declared enemies of the king —anyone who comes near us is in great peril. You shouldn't have come!"

Bad Bone put a finger to his lips, urging quieter voices. "But you're still glad I came, aren't you?" he whispered.

The smiling, hopeful face of her friend had its affect. "O.K., so I'm glad to see you," she admitted. "But you're still insane to be here. You might've been seen."

"No one saw me," Bad Bone replied in a low voice. "It's dark as pitch, and I kept to the back ways." He paused and put his arm around her shoulders. "I saw you leaving the High Seat after the decree was read. I called after you, but you didn't hear me. I've been wanting to come..." his voice trailed off. He looked down at the floor for some seconds, saying nothing more.

"I had to come," he continued. "I couldn't let you leave without telling you how sorry I am about what has happened. I had to be with you and Breister on your last night in the Hedgelands. It's taken me a long time to get up my courage to come, but I had to see you before you left."

"We leave at dawn," Helga replied. "Papa's in the workshop, packing our tools." She motioned at the jumble of chests, barrels, and satchels scattered around the room. "You can see we're mostly ready to leave. We've been preparing for departure almost non-stop for weeks. There's been so much to do."

"It's been so many weeks; you didn't expect to see me, did you?" Bad Bond asked.

"I can't believe anyone would come," Helga replied. "Especially the High One's celebrated courier. Your mission to the Jays, and the rescue of those poor beasts, is the talk of the market and taprooms."

Helga gave her friend a kind look full of understanding. “You did as you were asked, not knowing what you were doing,” she said simply.

Bad Bone could scarcely believe how good those words sounded. “I’m not”—the uncertainty lingered in his voice—“an outcast here? I’m still welcome at your hearth?”

“We’re all outcasts here,” Helga said grimly. “If you’re here, you’re marked as an outcast by the High One. Even if you’re never officially expelled, in coming here you’ve chosen to join us in our fate. Because of this, you’re forever our friend.” She gave Bad Bone a friendly smile.

“I brought you some information that may help you,” the Lynx offered.

“What is it?” Helga asked.

“I know some of the High One’s officers,” Bad Bone began. “One of them has got a loose lip—talks more than he should. I learn a few things that most beasts will never know...I’ve heard about safe routes beyond the Hedge.”

“Come, sit down,” Helga invited warmly. “I’ll bring you a drink and we can talk a while.”

Bad Bone sat down on a box, with his back towards a window that opened onto the road in front of the house. The window was slightly ajar to let in the refreshing evening air.

He had not sat more than a few moments, and his host had barely filled the teakettle with water, when he was startled by the mention of his name. “That traitorous fleabag, Bad Bone...” His skilled sense of his surroundings, long cultivated on dangerous missions, alerted him to the faint comment that disturbed his calm. He lifted his head carefully to peer out of the window. A troop of Skull Buzzards was standing in the road just outside the house.

The soldiers spoke in low voices, but now and then burst into a muffled laugh. Bad Bone could catch no repetition of his name, nor anything sounding like the words which had attracted his attention.

He wondered if he had imagined the words altogether, or misheard what had been said. The words, “traitorous fleabag,” however rang in his mind as clearly as if they had been shouted in his ear. Perhaps he had been wrong in thinking his own name was connected with that phrase, but he was confident that he had heard that specific phrase.

He was just turning away from the window, when he heard more: “We’ll hang up Bad Bone for the flies to eat when we find him.”

“I was right,” Bad Bone muttered. “It is as I feared.” He realized that the voices were becoming more distinct. The Royal Patrol troop was moving toward Helga’s front door.

“The High One was right to suspect that the highly-esteemed Bad Bone might be a traitor,” one of the Skull Buzzards snarled in a sarcastic tone. “He’s been asking more questions than is normal for

him. He knows all he needs to know to serve within the High One's wishes. Why does he need to know more about routes beyond the Hedge? And now we track him straight to the Wood Cow settlement—that traitorous fleabag will no longer be the great hero some make him out to be."

"He'll soon be fly bait!" cried another Buzzard, and the entire troop erupted in harsh guffaws.

At that moment, Helga came back into the room carrying a pitcher and cups. "Let me call Papa," she said. "He'll want to see you also and hear what you have to say."

"There's no time," Bad Bone replied. Keenly aware of his own danger, and the danger he had brought to Helga and her father, he continued quickly: "The Hedge will be opened at Bazoot's Store—there's a Skull Buzzard barracks near there." This was news to Helga. The High One didn't want anyone crossing through the Hedge except the exiles, so the site of the Hedge opening had been kept secret. At dawn, the Wood Cows were to gather in the square by the High Seat. From there, a Royal Patrol escort would conduct them to the place where they were to cross through the Hedge.

"That's not the best place for one going east," Bad Bone continued hurriedly, "but it will do. After crossing through the Hedge, go down the mountainside straight as possible to the north. At the bottom of the mountain, you should come upon a road of broken stones, left from ancient times. Follow the road until you come to a group of stone huts, surrounded by corrals. It's a small hamlet of farmers called Shell Kral. They grow a few potatoes and keep herds of giant tortoises. They're simple folk—a few Hares, a few Opossums, a few Skunks. In the center of town, under a fir tree, you will find a tea vendor—Bost Ony. Ask her about routes to the east."

The hairs on the back of his neck prickling with a rising sense of danger, Bad Bone gave Helga an urgent look. She heard it, too. The sound of heavy boots on the walk outside—the Royal Patrol was at her door!

Motioning quickly, Helga pointed toward the back entry. "Go to Papa. He'll hide you." The Lynx nodded, gave Helga a squeeze on the shoulder, and was off.

A harsh *RAP-RAP-RAP* sounded at the door. A Skull Buzzard pushed into the house as soon as Helga cracked the front door. Looking coldly at her, he said, "The Lynx that came down this road, where is he?"

Helga realized that attempting to stall the Royal Patrol was fruitless. Delay would only inflame their suspicions and endanger her and her father further. Walking quickly around the room, she flung open all of the doors, including the one through which Bad Bone had

so recently passed.

"You may look in all of these places, as you wish," said Helga, in a pleasant voice. "However, you shall not find any visitors here, only outcasts."

The Royal Patrol commander looked at her scornfully. His bitter death-white face sent a chill down Helga's spine. The Buzzard's horrid-smelling breath was hot in Helga's face as he glared into her eyes and hissed: "Perhaps he is hiding among his Wood Cow friends? The High One has been watching him. The sound of his chain-mail boots was heard on this road not long ago."

In a desperate attempt to delay the soldiers, without appearing to stall, Helga placed herself near one of the doors that Bad Bone had not used. Her movement succeeded in drawing the commander's attention.

"Yah! There! After him, troops!" the Buzzard yelled, pointing to the door Helga seemed to be favoring.

Making no attempt to block their search, Helga stood silently aside while the Patrol ransacked the room. Although only a few moments passed, the stratagem purchased precious time. Then, as their examination of the room ended, she took a great risk. Trusting in her father's quick mind, she invited her brutal enemy to follow her out to the workshop. "If you wish, sir, you may also like to question my father. Perhaps he's seen the Lynx you're seeking."

"Slug-brained idiot," said the soldier, "I take no advice from you. What is your imbecile father's word worth to me? I will see for myself." Motioning for his troops to follow, the Skull Buzzard pushed Helga aside. He and his troop stormed into the workshop, clubs at the ready, apparently hoping to surprise their prey.

But as the Royal Patrol pushed into the carpentry shop, they found no one. A light shined, however, from outside the back door, which stood open.

"Yaa-Haa! The scum went this way!" the commander cried, rushing out through the open door.

Clattering outside, the troop of Skull Buzzards pulled up in surprise. Some distance across the garden behind the workshop was an outhouse. A lantern swung gently above the door, casting illumination.

The blustering commander was speechless. He had not expected this. For a moment, he did not know what to do, but recovered quickly. Signaling to his troops, they ran quickly to surround the latrine.

As the Royal Patrol took up positions around the outhouse, their cursing and tramping brought a shout from inside the small shed. "Who's waiting for the pot?" Breister's voice boomed out cheerfully

through the closed door. “I’ll only be a minute. This is a one-holer, so you’ll just have to wait.”

Yanking the outhouse door open, and brandishing his hooked club, the commander yelled, “Freeze! Don’t move!”

Breister, apparently startled, stared at the Patrol leader. Although his carpenter’s apron gave him some privacy, he was clearly sitting on the toilet.

Looking embarrassed and a little annoyed, Breister said, “My, my, your mother needs to teach you some manners! Can’t a fellow be alone at a time like this?”

The commander’s eyes flashed dangerously, but seeing that there was no one else in the small, cramped shed, he said nothing.

“If you give me just a moment, I’ll be glad to see if I can help you fine fellows,” Breister offered. “But, I’m surprised that the High One’s troops do not have better things to do than to search outhouses...”

“Zet! Sharant!” the Royal Patrol leader shouted angrily. “The Lynx isn’t here! But he can’t have gone far. Leave the idiot Wood Cow! Spread out and check all the houses and alleys!”

The Royal Patrol dispersed to continue searching. As a parting shot, the Skull Buzzard commander spat at Breister, “I belong to the High One! Nothing has ever stopped me in his service. I will tear the Lynx to pieces, wherever he may be.” Swinging his club with ferocious rage, he shattered the lantern, spraying fragments of glass and blazing oil in all directions. “Bah! Sharant! You may tell the Lynx that is what awaits him, when I find him!” With that, the commander stomped off after his troop.

A surprisingly bemused Breister rose, adjusted his clothes, and stepped outside. “O.K., Bad Bone, it’s safe to come down. But don’t tarry. We don’t have long.”

Dropping down from a tree overhanging the latrine, the Lynx emerged from his hasty hiding place. Despite the dangerous encounter, the friends laughed heartily, although nearly without sound. A few moments of levity were all they could afford, however. The situation might be ridiculous, but it was also deadly serious.

“You don’t have much time,” Breister urged. “The Patrol will be back here soon enough, once they find no trace of you down the road. You must escape quickly.” He looked at his friend fondly. “We’ll never forget that you, alone among the Hedgies, showed us kindness. Although you serve the High One, you’ve been kind—in secret, a friend. We’ll never forget you.”

Bad Bone gave a low bow, his hand sweeping the ground. “I address myself to the noblest of true friends. I will never forget what you have done. Your courage is something those thugs will never understand,” the Lynx said, his voice thick with emotion. “The High

One and his legions mistake your simple ways for ignorance and weakness. But the fools do not know what true friendship is worth."

There was a long period of silence as the two unlikely comrades gazed at each other with respect. Then, Breister said gravely, "Enough of this—there's little time. That mob of Buzzards is crawling all over the place. You must get away." He urgently motioned his friend to depart. "You're the best climber there is. Now go and climb for all you're worth—time is short."

"I have learned the mountains well," Bad Bone replied. "There are places that no pursuer will be able to track me. Don't worry, I'll be fine—it'll be a solitary life, but I need some time to think. It will be well for me."

As Bad Bone turned to leave, Breister said, "There's a pair of my reed boots near the workshop door. They should fit over your chain mail and deaden the sound. You've got to go quietly."

The Lynx disappeared into the darkness, leaving Breister on watch in case the Royal Patrol returned.

It was a very dark night. With the outhouse lamp broken, Breister was left to peer through the gloom. Few beasts were stirring. A pair walked past on the way home from the tavern—singing and joking. Wisps of fog hung in depressions here and there, softening the yellow glow from the windows of houses scattered farther down the road.

As he kept watch, Breister could hear more than he could see. The large bell at Thedford's Crossing, counting off the last hours before the Wood Cow settlement would be deserted...The babble of voices at Glad Bean's Road House, having a final game of draughts and finishing off the last keg of Gulletwash...The mournful cry of Brigitte, the Steffes' infant, wailing for the last time in the house where she was born...So many generations, spent in tidy houses nestled under O'Fallon's Bluff...In a few hours, it would all be history.

# Milky Joe

As the mid-day sun beat down, a caravan of Wood Cow carts and wagons, accompanied by a contingent of Royal Patrol soldiers, halted at Bazoot's Store. A country store at the remote fringe of Hedgie settlements, Bazoot's sat at a place where the Forever End crossed a wide and fairly level meadow. In the clearing in front of the general store, some fifty Digger Hogs and Axe Beavers loitered, lounging around a small, dirty fire. The campsite of dingy tents, the dirt-caked tools, the smell of new-sawn logs—all explained the large, ragged break that had been created in the Hedge.

The travelers used the stop to take on additional water and make some final adjustments to their carts and baggage. Then, one by one, wagons bumped through the crude gap in the Hedge. Skull Buzzards inspected each one to make sure no stowaways were aboard. Once through the Hedge, each family took its own bearings. Most joined a long wagon train headed west, but a few intended to settle just beyond the Hedge, and Helga's family had its own plans.

The inspections were maddeningly slow. While they waited, parties of exiles talked in excited, but anxious tones. Before the opening stood some thirty or forty Hedge Blades—the elite battalion of Skull Buzzards assigned to guard the Forever End. Gazing grimly out from beneath their broad-brimmed, steel helmets, they crowded together, shoulder-to-shoulder, blocking advance toward the Hedge. When an inspection was complete, the line parted to allow passage, and then closed again to await the next approved party. Presenting a long line of razor-sharp swords—each 4 feet long—there would be no passing through the Hedge without their consent.

Scurrying back and forth among the émigrés, a few of Bazoot's clerks sold items to the travelers. Breister was glad to purchase some rivets to repair a fastening that had unexpectedly popped loose. In the midst of the crowd, Bazoot himself was pushing a barrel of Strawberry Fogg, "Hey-Hetty, me bully-wats! Cold Fogg, swallers and cups—last chance for civilized drink!" The fat Woodchuck waddled merrily, long hair and apron flapping in the breeze. Here and there the jovial storekeeper stopped to turn the spigot for customers taking a last swig of Fogg before beginning their journey into the unknown.

On a bench close by the line of Hedge Blades, a Wolf sat with a

heavy ledger lying across his knees. A second Wolf—an albino, small and thick-necked, with a large bristly moustache—stood nearby flipping gold coins high in the air. Attracted by the glint of the flying coins, a crowd was gathering around him. Helga found something familiar about him—the clouded, pink eyes; the hard, chiseled jaw—somewhere she had seen him before. But his powerful voice shook her memory as he shouted out a rhyme:

*Jokes 'n tricks upon the King,*
*A pocket full of coins*
*Twenty-seven rings*
*To every beast as joins*
*Milky Joe is here to take you*
*To live a life of ease*
*Line up all you nameless whos*
*For riches as you please*
*Come along with Milky Joe*
*Throw off your toil and woe*
*Let the King foam and mutter*
*While you eat jam and butter*

The recruiting pitch succeeded, at first, in attracting a few young Wood Cows to listen curiously. But soon parents called their young ones back. "Don't you go listening to that hogwash peddler!" one scolded. "Keep your ears clean of that trash flim-flamer!" another parent hissed. "He's a lying shill, he is! Why, that Milky Joe is nothing more than a slaver—hanging around troubled folk, trying to snare unsuspecting idiots and kids. Babbling against the King and talk of riches will always suck in a few down on their luck or looking for adventure. But it's a pit of hell—mark my words!"

Helga winced as another comment reached her ears "Yah, he's got *twenty-seven rings* alright, iron ones that go right around your neck! Why else do you think he can scoff at the King right under the noses of those Hedge Blades? He just signs you up, and sells you right off to the King's own bloodsuckers!"

The touch of cold iron seemed, for a moment, to be palpable on Helga's neck. She shuddered. Unease trickled through her heart. She'd heard stories about Milky Joe, but they had always before been almost fanciful—a "boogy beast" sort of tale. She'd never thought of him as being real, but now that he was sitting just a few feet away, she felt a deep sense of dread. It was as if she knew Milky Joe was deeply evil, but at the same time, could not remember exactly what she knew. The chill passing through her was not fear, but a confused feeling that she had seen the white wolf with pink eyes before...heard his booming

voice...knew him from somewhere...

# “You can’t stay here, weevils!”

The inspections dragged on into the afternoon. Little by little the line of wagons and carts shortened. Being one of the last in line, Breister and Helga took time to shift gear and baggage to better balance their load.

On top of the load was Helga’s favorite family possession—the Root Teaching—a collection of Wood Cow wisdom that embodied their philosophy of life. Helga, like every Wood Cow, had her favorites:

*Tossing crickets in another beast’s drink does not make a friend.*

*Throwing knives in the dark rarely fixes a problem.*

*A beast who sees for herself is not a slave to what she is told.*

*Justice considers small beasts before big plans.*

*Listen where others say there is nothing to hear, and learn.*

*Knowledge is bread, wisdom is coffee, and work is fire.*

In the happy times before Helbara went missing amidst Wrackshee slavers ten years before, Helga’s mother had read the Root Teaching to her and Emil every night. They also talked about how the Teaching applied in this or that situation. Helga missed those wonderful times. With Emil also now lost, and the entire Wood Cow clan scattered to the winds, for Helga, the Root Teaching seemed to hold the sense of her family together.

After this precious belonging in importance, were essential practical items: fishing line and the flicker-pole. The fishing line served both to catch fish for food, and as a weapon for defense. In the hands of a skilled Wood Cow, the line weighted with a stone sinker could immobilize an attacker in a massive tangle. The flicker-pole’s flexible strength made it a very useful tool and weapon also. The most versatile tools they would have on the journey, the Wood Cows could wield both with power and skill.

Following this, several precious items of household furniture: the

chest, lovingly handmade by her mother, that held the family's woodworking tools; Breister's reading rocker and Helga's carving table; the woodshop tables and benches; the kitchen stools and breadbox; the clothes cabinets...and so on.

And, of course, the food: sacks of dried, pounded fish; baskets of pine nuts; dried apples and pears; rosehips for making tea; pouches of honey nut butter; and chunks of course, leathery trout jerky.

Uniquely among the exiles, Helga and Breister did not have a cart or wagon. Instead, they pulled a homemade boat behind them on a sled. A great river was said to be just beyond the Hedgewall to the east. Old stories told of a time when the Hedgeland folk had eaten fish from a great eastern river, said to be within a day's walk. If they could make the river, they hoped to sail into the unknown lands toward the rising sun. Bad Bone's intelligence about routes to the east had given them even more hope.

By the time Breister and Helga got through the gap in the Hedge, a long line of wagons stretched toward the western horizon. A relatively gentle slope led off in that direction around the mountainside, and virtually all the exiles headed that way. As they turned in a different direction—almost with a sense of reassuring himself of the decision to go it alone—Breister observed, "We are a family of the rising sun! We go toward the new light, not the sunset. We may die, just as the others may die. Let us die, then, going toward the new day, not the past one." And so, following the directions Bad Bone had provided, they headed down the mountainside.

The wild and unfamiliar terrain was far more rugged than they had expected. A confusion of creeks and ravines cut through the steep mountainside, making it difficult to tell which way to go. Breister was obliged to cut a path through tangled briar thickets and brush. Rocky hillsides shot up at sharp angles, to dizzying heights.

Several times, they slipped on the steep slopes. Other times, fallen trees and rocks had to be moved. They struggled on like this until the sun began to set.

"It's time to find a campsite for the night," Helga said as dusk was falling. "Where should we stop?"

"Perhaps that may be a cabin up ahead," Breister replied, pointing to a wisp of smoke catching final rays of sun above a rise. Peering through the deepening twilight, the outline of a chimney was visible.

"Yes, there's a sort of farmstead," Helga agreed, as they walked closer. Several more buildings and other signs of habitation appeared as they continued their approach.

Perched on a plateau of level ground, several stone cabins were scattered amongst an intricate network of pens enclosed by low rock walls. Large numbers of tortoises with huge, high-domed shells

crawled around in the corrals.

Amazed and baffled, Breister and Helga proceeded down the path toward the first cabin. A tall, lanky Opossum, cracking a long whip at some of the dome-shelled creatures he was herding from one pen to another, noticed them. He looked over the newcomers suspiciously, his head completely hidden by a white bandana wrapped tightly over his head and knotted at the back.

Closing the gate behind the last tortoise, he stepped toward the travelers with a fearsome look in the eyes that glinted just under the edge of the headwrap. Stepping toward them, he cracked the whip sharply on the rock path—an obvious command that they halt.

"I am Matsu," he said, "Who are you, strangers?"

Breister introduced himself and Helga. "We are very glad to meet you, Matsu," he said calmly. "We'd like to draw up a chair at your table tonight, and sleep by the fire if we could."

"Ayah!" Matsu replied angrily. Slashing his whip once more, he shouted. "Begger weevils! Begger weevils! Why should I let you stay? What's your business in Shell Kral?"

"Ah! You take us wrong!" Breister cried. "Two weary travelers, with all our worldly goods, only stopping to rest and talk with Bost Ony..."

As Breister uttered these words, the Opossum's dark eyes flashed with fire. "What do you want with Bost Ony?" he asked. "What do you come to her for? Why are you here?"

"We have lost our way," Helga explained. "We don't know which way to go. A friend told us that Bost Ony knew safe routes to the east."

"A friend sent you here?" Matsu repeated. "Milky Joe—did he send you?"

"No," Helga answered slowly, tingling with unease at once again encountering the name. "We're not friends with anyone called Milky Joe. We're just lost beasts looking for a place to stay the night and then a safe path east in the morning. That's all we want. We're very sorry if we've disturbed you, Matsu."

"You can't stay here any longer, weevils," replied Matsu, staring at them with a stone-faced scowl. "No one but friends of Milky Joe can be in Shell Kral when he is coming to trade."

"If we can't stay, where shall we go?" asked Breister. "We'd not trouble good beasts such as yourself if we knew where else to go."

"Ayah!" the Opossum snarled, pointing toward the east, "them's as want to go to the east, should go that direction. You've nothing to lose that you will not lose anyway if you stay here. I do you this one mercy. Now, be off with you!" he snapped the whip in their direction again. Ha! Ha! Ha-Ho!"

“If you please, Matsu,” Breister began, “if we can’t see Bost Ony, can you tell us a safe path to follow?”

“So, you’d like to be able to go easy as you please, is that it, weevils?” he replied. “All the routes to the east are safe—if you survive! Ha! Ha! Ha-Ho! Any safety you might find in Bost Ony’s advice is lost if you stay here one more instant!” the Opossum cried, slashing viciously with his whip. “Leave! Be gone, weevils! Be thankful I show you this mercy before Milky Joe and his Wrackshees arrive. I could trade you for many tortoises!”

“Trade us for tortoises!” cried Helga.

“Both of you weevils together,” replied Matsu, “might bring 3-4 nice high-grade trallés.”

“Trallés?” asked Breister.

“Trallés are the currency of slaving around here,” the Opossum replied in an evil tone, flicking his whip lightly for emphasis. “Racing tortoises. There’s lots of fancy beasts all over that love their classy clothes, princely titles...and, racing trallés...Some fancy beasts favor the laces of Matuch and Framm, or the brocades of Sonivad and velvets of Potwigg, or Rotter crystal and wine, but almost anywhere, the fancies covet racing trallés.” Matsu’s eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. “Mercy’s not much more than a word around here—and it don’t last long,” he hissed. “Unless you’ve a will to be sold for a few trallés, take that bit o’ timber you’re dragging behind you and beat it!” Ferociously cracking his whip in all directions, he advanced slowly toward the unfortunate travelers. “Be off wi’ya, weevils!”

Saying nothing more, the Wood Cows turned away from Shell Kral and set their course for the brow of a distant hill.

# The Only Possibility

Helga and Breister didn't travel far before they stumbled upon a stream that appeared suitable for their boat. Twilight was giving way to deepening dark, and they made camp and cooked supper. Helga made a hearty soup from slugs, rockbeets and snowberries, while Breister baked pine nut bread. They ate happily and then each bedded down under a cloak for the night.

The next morning they launched their boat and set out. The river was swift and there were frequent rapids. But their boat was sturdy and they were fearless.

The rapids proved to be far more dangerous than they could easily handle, however. Their vessel plunged wildly and sometimes spun crazily out of control. They used their long oars as poles to push away from on-rushing boulders, or to regain control of their craft as it flew through the spray. Water sloshed around their ankles, and the beleaguered Wood Cows bailed frantically to keep the boat from sinking. For nearly an hour they found no rest or relief.

Happily, as the water in the boat rose to dangerous levels, the Wood Cows found a rock jutting out into the river that provided a secure place to tie their boat and a narrow ledge to stand upon. Joyfully, for the first time in their pell-mell, cascading trip down the river, they were able to get out of their boat and stand on solid ground.

Slumping to the ground, resting and thoughtful, they were quiet for a time. Then, Helga, who had leaned her head back against the rock wall, spoke. "The rock carries an unusual amount of vibration," she said. "It's as if there is a far-off rumbling...perhaps there is a gigantic falls around the bend."

"But there's no mist rising to the sky, Helga," Breister mused. "If there were a great falls, there would be clouds of mist rising into the sky. It must be something else...but what?"

"We can't go forward without knowing what lies ahead," Helga observed. "We'll have to explore, before we go further on this river."

Her father agreed, but they realized that was a difficult task. Rising perhaps 3,000 feet on both sides of the stream, sheer cliffs seemed to block any advance. Retreat was also impossible. The force and speed of the river made it impossible that they could force their boat back

upstream. The only possibility was to go forward. But how?

"I think I can climb the cliff to the top," Helga said softly, as if to herself. "There are breaks and ledges enough that I could climb up, then follow the river to see what's ahead. What do you think?"

"I think you have to try it," Breister began. "You used to climb all over everything when you were young. You can scout the river downstream and perhaps find a safe route for the boat. When you return, we'll make a plan."

Helga gave her father a long look, as they both considered what lay ahead. Then she prepared to leave.

"Catch some fish for us," Helga said. "We'll have a good fish fry when I get back..." Her voice trailed off as they both realized how long that might be, if ever. Helga threw her arms around her father in a lingering final embrace. Then she gathered a bit of food and water in a pack and began to climb.

Breister stood for a long while watching Helga skillfully pick her way up the lower portion of the cliff. He admired her courage. Taking one last look after his daughter, Breister settled down and dropped his fishing line in the river...

# “My life, I am a Borf!”

When Bad Bone had slipped on Breister’s reed boots and padded away from Helga’s cottage, at first things went well. In the early going, the deep darkness shielded him. A faint glow at the horizon, however, promised a full moon would soon rise into the cloudless night sky, pressing the urgency of escape upon him. “What a miserable night to attempt escape,” he thought, nerves tingling with alert. Even keeping to the deepest shadows, he sometimes would be forced to step across moonlit gaps in the cover. “There is nothing to do but try,” he scolded himself softly. “I can beat this. I’ll not allow a gang of bungling cutthroats to catch me.”

Crawling on his belly along ditches for concealment, Bad Bone crept cautiously toward the forbidding mountains that rose just beyond the Bor Jeeves River. Flowing past the hamlet at O’Fallon’s Bluff, the river represented safety. “If I can just get across the river,” he thought, “they’ll never be able to track me in the mountains.” He hoped to cling to the side of the ferryboat at Thedford’s Crossing and, breathing through a reed, catch a ride across the river undetected. Once across the Bor Jeeves, escape into the wildest ranges of the Don’ot Stumb Mountains beckoned. The fugitive Lynx knew that time was short. Soon, fruitless search of the hamlet would turn the Royal Patrol to possible avenues of his escape. Each moment, the full moon rose more brightly into the sky.

Realizing that spies might be watching the normal river crossing, Bad Bone crept softly toward the crossing point. The Bor Jeeves River cascaded down from the mountains in a furious series of cataracts. These made the river impossible to cross upstream from the ferry dock operated by Stoke Thedford. Every hour, Stoke’s boats made a circuit across the Bor Jeeves. It was the only safe crossing in miles.

Bad Bone listened as the hourly bell rang, calling passengers to board the ferry. Except for the bell, however, he was puzzled by the unexpected silence at the crossing. Normally, he knew, the ferry dock would be packed at this time of the evening, as creatures hurried home or went to visit friends. “There should be lots of folk boarding the ferry,” Bad Bone thought. “Where is everyone?” Something was wrong at the ferry crossing. Straining his ears to pick up any sound that might give him information, he tingled with anxious suspense.

The absence of any of the normal sounds of passenger traffic was so stark as to be sinister in its implications.

"There must be spies or soldiers watching the ferry," he concluded. "The other beasts know there's trouble and are staying away. It's a trap. I'll have to take my chances further downstream." With this thought in mind, Bad Bone wormed his way, inch by inch, away through the brush where he had been hiding. "Haven't been downstream from Thedford's in years," he reflected as he crawled along. "The river's deep and swift through there...but no rapids as I recall. Perhaps I can swim it at some point...but that'll have to wait for daylight," he mused. By crawling a few dozen feet, then resting and listening for several minutes, then crawling another distance, he gradually moved down the river. He heard no signs that he was being pursued, and after about an hour of proceeding in this manner, Bad Bone stood up and began moving quietly from tree to tree.

He now moved quickly away from Thedford's Crossing, although he stayed alert and watchful. Traveling into increasingly wild terrain, he kept moving in utmost stealth for several more hours. At last, judging that it must be the wee hours of the morning, and feeling a creeping sense of bone-weary exhaustion, he stopped to rest. He mounted a boulder-strewn slope, slumped behind a large rock, and was soon asleep.

Just as the first streaks of daybreak lightened the sky, a call awakened him. Instantly alert, Bad Bone leapt to a low, defensive crouch, eyes darting. Standing among the boulders on the slope above him, he saw three Borf scouts—instantly recognizable to him by their low, flattened hats. The two adult female Squirrels, and young male Coyote, wore the close-fitting hats which sloped down from the crown of the head with long flaps made of willow bark and grass woven together. Only their painted ears—notched in traditional Borf style—were not covered. Familiar with the clan of wandering nomads, he circled his arm above his head in the customary Borf greeting. One of the Borfs stepped toward him and repeated the sign of friendship.

Bad Bone approached the party, turning his head to show a small notch cut from the edge of his left ear. He wished them to know that he had once lived among the Borf, and the ear notching was proof of that. Three years earlier, as a Climbing Lynx in training, Bad Bone had been assisted by a Borf raiding party.

A fierce clan of nomadic Squirrels and Coyotes, the Borf generally kept to their homelands in the wildest ranges of the Don'ot Stumb Mountains. Their bitter enmity with the High One, however, sometimes brought Borf raiding parties down to plunder royal caravans. Masters of stout cord nets, Borf raiders did not attack with deadly weapons. Relying on surprise and overwhelming numbers, Borf

raiding parties swept down on hapless caravans encamped for the night. In seconds, dozens of nets were tossed across guards and any other resistance. Taking the plunder they sought—trallés—the raiders escaped into the darkness.

Despite their fierceness, Borf raiders were essentially peaceful. Their style of attack was extremely successful and, so long as they were not pursued, the frightful tangles of net they left behind were the only harm they caused to those they attacked. Let any beasts set off in pursuit, however, and they would encounter skillfully made traps of every sort. Many a Skull Buzzard had found himself hanging upside down by one leg—victim of a hidden rope trap. Borf raiders were so skilled that capturing them was nearly impossible. Although the High One grumbled at their thievery, he couldn't enforce his will in the rugged, lawless Borf lands. The losses were accepted as a cost of the trade in trallés—the 'tidy little trade' that Fropperdaft and his brother carried on.

While on his first mission as a Climbing Lynx, Bad Bone was camped high in the mountains when his cook fire exploded. The inexperienced Lynx had chosen porous, water-soaked rocks as a bed for his fire. Water in the rocks, turning rapidly into steam, could not escape, and the stones exploded. Shards of stone and pieces of iron pot flew everywhere, hitting Bad Bone in several places. A Borf raiding party attracted by the explosion found him lying unconscious, seriously injured.

From times long past, Lynx had served the High Ones in positions of highest trust and on missions of utmost importance. The Borf, on the other hand, hated the High Ones and all that served them. The Borf were not a cruel folk—far from it. Fierce toward the High Ones and sworn enemies of the slave trade they carried on, the Borf were friendly and compassionate toward all others. They carried the badly injured Lynx to their camp and nursed him back to health. During the several weeks of his recovery, Bad Bone was accepted as a member of the clan.

As he approached the Borf raiders now, his sign of greeting, the ear notching, and his friendly attitude were enough to assure the party of his good intentions. Dropping the nets they held at the ready, they embraced Bad Bone in welcome.

From the many freshly-killed lizards and snakes tied to the poles they carried, Bad Bone recognized that this was a small hunting party. Knowing that the main Borf encampment must be nearby, he asked to accompany them to their camp. The Borf readily included him in their party and they set off, the oldest female leading the way. After a half-day's hike further down the river, a larger party of about sixty Borf appeared from all directions, surrounding Bad Bone and those

conducting him. Accompanied by friendly clan beasts, and familiar with the customary show of over-powering force, Bad Bone gave the sign of greeting and advanced toward the Coyote he assumed to be the leader. Reaching him, he turned his head once again to show his ear notch. Joyfully, the Borf chieftain stepped close and pressed his own notched ear against Bad Bone's—affirming friendship with one accepted as a brother.

After this show of acceptance, the Coyote—Borjent by name—motioned to several Squirrels. "Tell the folk that our old 'Friend from the Biting Fire' has returned. Roast the lizards! Prepare a feast!" The Borf went off at a dead run to inform the others to prepare for their arrival. Soon the entire party also set out for the main encampment.

When they reached the camp, Bad Bone was ushered into a makeshift brush hut and seated on green boughs and tanned snake skins. Renewing his acquaintance with many Borf he knew from his earlier visit, he laughed until his jaws hurt. Many small Borf crowded around, eager to see the beast who had been 'bitten' by the fire and had iron in his knees. Bad Bone entertained the wee ones with stories of many of his other adventures as a Climbing Lynx.

As the sun approached its setting, a meal was offered. Bad Bone enjoyed gnawing the meat of several spiny-horned lizards, roasted on skewers, with wild carrots and onions. Cakes of wild berries, meal and cherries followed. Cold water washed down what he pronounced "a hearty meal worthy of the many years I have waited for it!"

When the meal was over, Bad Bone strolled down to the river with Borjent. He learned that Borjent was the son of Borswen, the Coyote chieftain Bad Bone had grown close to during his first visit with the Borf. "My father died a year ago, " Borjent related. "A royal caravan was taking a large number of trallés to deal with a slave trader by the name of Milky Joe. The High One buys slaves to build his castle—paying for them in trallés." He paused, eyes flashing with fearsome anger as he gazed across the river. "The Borf hate the slaving. When we can, we raid the caravans and steal the trallés." He paused and a hint of a grin passed over his face. "When our raiders attack a trallé caravan," he continued, "we hit them with such surprise that the attack is over before they can resist."

Demonstrating the throwing of nets with arm motions, the Borf leader explained how royal caravans were plundered. "After the guards are trapped in nets, other nets, especially for the purpose, are rolled out and the trallés loaded on them. Then, the trallés are quickly carried off by runners bearing the nets. My father loved running with the trallé carriers—but he wasn't as strong as he once was, and his heart failed him on that raid."

"I'm so sorry," Bad Bone responded. "He was a great leader and a

dear friend."

"He gave his life for the cause of justice," Borjent replied. "That's how I remember him—and why I now run with the trallé carriers myself. Every caravan we plunder is one less serving the High One's hellish project."

"Why do you sell trallés?" Bad Bone asked.

"You know we are a simple folk," Borjent replied. What need do we have for trallés? Only the wealthy want them. They're useless to us. But why stand by while beasts are enslaved to build a worthless tomb for a tyrant? Our raiders are brave, we can free some doomed beasts...On the frontier of law and disorder the High One's nice rules don't apply. There's some wild and unsavory places—dubious bazaars where slavers sell to anyone who pays the going rate in trallés." Borjent paused, a smile spreading across his face. "And the raiding is sport for us! What better fun than ruining the High One's cursed trade?"

Bad Bone's mind was reeling. So much came into focus. So many things understood in a flash—The Hedgies carrying up their 'sacred stones' but not actually building *Maev Astuté*...The sacred climb reserved for Hedgies, but the actual building work being beneath their station...With so many workers needed to build the Crowning Glory, where did they come from? Now Bad Bone knew the answer.

He was silent for a time. At last he inquired if Borjent knew a safe place to cross the river. From Bad Bone's viewpoint, the river was still too dangerous to cross safely. The Borf homelands were in the mountains on the other side of the river, however, so they must know how to cross.

"A half-day's march further downstream, it joins another river—the Sar Jeeves—twice as large," Borjent replied. "Where the rivers merge, they cross a level plateau known to us as the 'Confusion of Hopes.' The Bor Jeeves splinters into many smaller streams that twist and meander as they flow into the larger river. The Bor Jeeves stops being an impassable torrent, and becomes a multitude of small, gently flowing streams. For the traveler, the long dangerous river appears to be tamed. At the beginning, the countless streams all look promising, as if they will take you somewhere if you follow them in a boat. Most of them, however, flow into bramble thickets and rock-choked channels that cannot be floated in a boat. But, if you ignore the hope of riding in a boat, the confusion of streams can be crossed. That is the way to our homelands." Drawing many wavy lines on the ground to represent the rivers coming together, he piled large stones on one side to show the steep mountains where the Borf lived. Drawing a straight line across the wavy ones into the pile of stones, he concluded, "In those mountains, beyond the junction of the rivers—we live in plenty,

safety, and peace. You are welcome among us." The Coyote chieftain pointed toward the horizon where his clan lived.

Bad Bone made no reply, but only gazed into the distance where Borjent pointed. "Come with us," Borjent urged. "You can be one of us. Our folk love you. We could use someone with your climbing skills in our raids. You would have no more worries about the High One...instead, you would be a worry for him!"

Bad Bone again was silent. His thoughts were busy, and his heart full. The offer was tempting. He liked the Borf and he relished the idea of avenging the wrongs the High One had done to Helga and her friends.

"Why does the High One not pursue you?" he asked at last. "If you raid him continually and steal his trallés, why does he not send Royal Patrol Buzzards to destroy you? He has enough, I should think..." Bad Bone was genuinely puzzled about details of Borjent's story. "The Borf lands are still within the Forever End," he continued. "You are subjects of the High One, are you not? Surely the High One does not allow rebels and bandits such as you to go unpunished?" Fear of capture played no part in Bad Bone's questioning, but if he was to join the Borf, he wanted to know how things were.

Borjent laughed heartily as he heard the questions. Looking at his inquisitive friend, he gave his face a very stern expression and moved his lips as if talking forcefully—but actually said nothing. Bad Bone, feeling even more confused, gave Borjent a perplexed look. Borject repeated the stern expression and forceful, but soundless, movement of his lips.

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Bad Bone clearly did not understand what Borjent was trying to tell him. With tears of merriment shining in his eyes, the Borf leader clasped Bad Bone's shoulders in affectionate embrace. "Dear friend," he said, "do not be surprised that I laugh at your questions." Pausing briefly to stifle his chuckles, the Coyote continued, "Beyond the Confusion of Hopes the commands of the High One are not heard. That is the meaning of my stern looks and soundless shouting." He once again chuckled. "The High One makes many words, but there are places that they are not heard." The Coyote once again looked sternly at Bad Bone and soundlessly shouted at him. Then, smiling at his friend, he said, "The Borf do not hear the High One's noise."

"But, what about the Forever End?" Bad Bone asked. "What about the Crowning Glory and the sacred climb? What about the Royal Patrols? What about the Hedge Blades? Surely the High One doesn't just ignore your attacks and leave you to yourselves?"

"The Hedge is only as strong as the High One's words!" Borjent replied. "Where my folk live, no Royal Patrol has ever been seen! The

Hedge was never completely planted—there is no Hedge beyond the Borf homelands! The High One claims many lands where his words are mere noise." Borjent shouted again in silence to emphasize his point. Then he chuckled and embraced Bad Bone once again. "The High One's words are heard in many places, and his Patrols back up his words where it is easy to do so. But, where his words are not heard, and it is not easy for his cutthroat Buzzards to make folk hear his words—in those places, we hear only our own words. The Borf speak for ourselves."

Bad Bone remembered one of his missions into a wild, barely-settled region of the Hedgelands. He had seen stretches of the Forever End in disrepair. Obviously untended, but still a formidable barrier, he had not imagined that the Hedge might end altogether in some of the far away clan homelands. "A life beyond the reach of the High One?" Bad Bone tried to imagine such a thing.

"My life, I am a Borf!" the fugitive Lynx exclaimed. "When do we leave?" he added, feeling a tingling sense of new-found freedom.

# Beyond the High One's Reach

In the days following his decision to join the Borf, Bad Bone wholeheartedly fell into the life of the nomadic clan. For eight days, festivities of welcome for the new clan member continued. The food of the wandering folk was simple, but plentiful—huge pots of sweet, sticky rice, eaten in paw-sized balls, and the usual roasted lizards. There were nightly dances accompanied by dozens of small lizard skin drums, tuned to different pitches; turtle-shell tambourines; and snake rattle shakers. The adults sang raucous songs and played instruments as they watched the young beasts dance on their front paws and perform acrobatic stunts. Bad Bone commented that he had "never seen creatures with such wonderful strength in their arms" as he watched them dance for hours without stopping. When the nightly festivities ended, the camp fell into a silent, satisfied sleep.

In addition to feasts and frolics, however, Bad Bone's welcome also included introduction to camp life—rising early to set water boiling in the cook pots, curing snake skins in the sun to make clothing, and caring for the wee beasts with songs and games. Finding safety from his pursuers, Bad Bone also found an acceptance for which he had long yearned. "If brotherhood is more than a word," he thought, "this must be what it is like."

When the Borf broke camp, they journeyed through a narrow opening, called Tramandrivot—the 'Axe Mark' in Kinshy—in an otherwise impassable razorback ridge.

"This trail is murder to climb," Bad Bone complained, as he struggled over the small stones covering the trail almost like a bed of rollers. "If you use this trail so often, why don't you take time to clear it and make it easier to travel?" he asked Borjent.

"We don't dare touch the stones," Borjent replied. "The trail is maintained like this by the Munk clans that live on the ridge. "You don't see them, but they are watching us even now." Seeing Bad Bone grow instantly more alert, Borjent touched his arm with a friendly, comforting paw. "Not to worry, my friend," he advised. "The Munk are friendly to us, and do a service by keeping the trail covered with these small stones," Borjent continued between labored breaths as he climbed. "Wait a bit and I'll tell you more when we reach the top." Bad Bone was quite happy to wait—the climb took all of his breath.

Reaching the summit, the trekkers stopped to rest. No one spoke for some time, as everyone regained strength. Ragged breathing gradually subsided, and the characteristic Borf laughing and joking returned. Borjent pointed back down the trail. “The stones on the trail protect all the creatures on the far side of the ridge from intruders,” he said. “Tramandrivot is the only way for a large group to cross the ridge. Munk Sentinels are on constant watch and repair the stone bed in the trail as needed. The treacherous path deters most beasts of ill-will from attempting the climb, and slows others down long enough to sound the alarm. When an alarm is sounded, the Munk roll massive stones down on the trail from the heights. That thwarts any other foolish attackers.” Smiling, Borjent waved to the heights above his head. “You won’t see the Munks, but they are there,” he explained. Soon after, a small round pebble sailed down from above, bouncing off of the rocks with a soft Clink-Clink-Clink. “Munk Sentinels returning the greeting,” Borjent explained, grinning.

Gazing up at the rocky pinnacles that soared around the sides of Tramandrivot, Bad Bone saw no hint of the hidden Munk Sentinels. “I begin to see how it might, indeed, be possible for clans of folk to live beyond the reach of the High One’s rule,” he commented. “Very interesting,” he continued, “very interesting, indeed.”

“You begin to see,” Borjent replied, “but you do not yet fully understand.” Beckoning for the Lynx to follow him, the Borf chieftain walked a number of steps toward where the trail apparently descended the far side of the ridge. Leading Bad Bone around the side of a rock wall, he extended his arm to indicate what lay beyond the summit. The long, steep climb up the slippery trail led to a breath-taking vista at the top of the ridge.

On the far side of the steeply pitched ridge, mountains glistened with lush forests, hidden here and there by wisps of moist clouds. Bad Bone had never seen such forests as these. Luxuriant forest unrolled down the slopes into a long mist-shrouded valley that stretched as far the eye could see. Off in the distance, just peeking above the endless clouds covering the valley, he could make out the continuation of mountains.

“The Confusion of Hopes lies below,” Borjent said. “Within that misty valley is the pathway to our home.”

“But, the valley is buried in clouds,” Bad Bone exclaimed. “How could a beast ever find his way through such a dense forest drenched in fog?”

“Ah,” replied Borjent, “now you understand the Confusion of Hopes. Most beasts enter the valley and assume that the only way through is to follow the stream courses.” He shook his head sadly, then continued. “Hope after hope rises in the heart of a beast trying to

find a way through that valley by boat...but it leads to nothing but confusion. The only way through is to climb across the valley in the canopy of the trees!"

"Go across the valley in the trees!" Bad Bone replied in astonishment.

The Borf leader held up his arm to call a halt to the march. "I'll explain more later," he replied. "Now, the folk are tired." He swung his pack to the ground and laid it against a tree. Then he called to the Borf following him, "We stop here for food and rest." The Squirrels and Coyotes happily dropped their packs, laid down the pole and net sleds that some pulled, and fell on the ground to rest.

A while later, Bad Bone sat chewing dried snake meat and sticky wads of rice from the satchel he carried. He watched a rain cloud sweep over the mountainside below them. Borjent walked up and dropped to the ground beside him. "The rain is a good thing for us," he smiled. "It makes the trees grow to massive size. Some of the cedars are over a thousand years old. What we see of the forest from here is one of the best roadways imaginable for Borfs. The gigantic trees form a dense canopy—a network of huge limbs and mossy vines. Where the limbs and vines fail us, our folk have strung net pathways from tree to tree—think only of the ground, and you will never escape from the Confusion of Hopes," he observed. "But consider the canopy, and all the directions are open to you. A strong Climbing Lynx like you will find it wee beast's play."

"I don't like water," Bad Bone remarked glumly, "but it looks like a tremendous adventure!" he concluded with a smile.

"The rains come off of the Great Sea, which is just beyond that last line of low peaks you see at the horizon," Borjent replied. "The clouds drop most of their rain as they rise up over this high ridge, so one side is very wet, and the other much drier."

"Wee-heww..." Bad Bone whistled as his eyes took in the sharp contrast between the two sides of the mountain ridge.

"The ridge is a sort of demarcation line," the Coyote continued. "Along the Misty Coast of the Great Sea, rain clouds develop every afternoon and move inland. Rain pours down on the wet side of the ridge all night long. But on the other side, it rains only a little—you never suspect such a contrast until you reach the summit."

"Well, I still don't like to get wet," Bad Bone laughed.

"And you won't," Borjent said. "We will cross the Confusion of Hopes in a few hours—the route is easy for us. We will be on the high ground again, and heading into our homelands, before the rains begin. We will camp here tonight and set out just after dawn tomorrow."

Bad Bone smiled broadly. "I'll be up early and see to the cook fires," he said, showing his pleasure at the plan.

“Well, not so fast, my friend,” Borjent laughed. “I’ve got a task for you before you cross the Confusion of Hopes and go to our home.” He paused and rolled out a reed mat in front of them. “When you lived among us while you healed, we accepted you, but did not fully trust you. You were a Lynx in service to the High One and we dared not show you everything about our life. But now, as a new member of the clan, there is something that you must see.” He pointed to the mat, which was actually a rude map. “Two day’s trek from here, some distance into the forests on the dry side of the ridge, lies a caravan way-station, Mis’tashe. Caravans travel back and forth between Port Newolf, on the Great Sea, and the Hedgelands, carrying slaves and trallés. They halt at Mis’tashe to take on food and water.” He could see from his friend’s intent gaze that Bad Bone was listening with great interest.

“The Borf never attack the caravans in that region. The terrain is too difficult and there is no easy escape with captured trallés—there are more favorable places to launch our raids,” he continued. “The caravan masters know they are safe at the way-station, so they do not mount heavy guards.” He pointed at the map with a stick, tracing a route. “A skilled climber like you can approach the caravan rest stop from this direction. I want you to lead a small scouting party and see what a trallé caravan looks like—you will need this understanding to help us later in our raids. Are you ready for such a mission?”

“Fitted with iron in my knees, and fire in my eyes, brother!” Bad Bone declared.

“I ask you to take Bormarojey and Bormaso,” Borjent directed, naming two seasoned Borf Squirrels that Bad Bone knew well. “You will put the ‘dead beast’s eye’ on the caravan,” he instructed. “No one pays attention to the gaze of a dead beast,” he explained, seeing Bad Bone’s quizzical look. “You are to scout the caravan with such stealth that you are noticed as much as the gaze of a dead beast.” Giving thorough instructions with the assistance of the map, Borjent directed that the scouting party leave immediately. “You will rejoin us at our home camp in not more than five days,” he concluded. The beasts going with you are well-used to the route. You will do well.” So saying, he left the Lynx to reflect on all he had learned and prepare himself for his mission.

Finishing his simple repast, Bad Bone went to gather the other members of his scouting party. He found the two Squirrels sitting at the bottom of a tiny waterfall spilling out of a crevice in the rock above them. Holding gourd cups under the falls, they used gulps of cold water to wash down the dry snake meat they were eating.

Calling to Bormarojey and Bormaso, he told them of their mission. Silently, a general smile moved across their faces. They were pleased

to go with Bad Bone on the proposed journey. Bormaso spoke what was in the heart of both Borf Squirrels: “That a Lynx goes with Borf to cast the dead beast’s eye on one of the High One’s caravans is something new under the sun. The High One’s sleep will be disturbed before he hears the last of this.”

# Casting the Dead Beast's Eye

Scuttling forward on their bellies, Bad Bone and his companions peeked out from the protecting cover of pine trees and ferns. Not far away, crowds of unsavory looking beasts—mostly Wolves and Cougars, with a sprinkling of Mink—loitered around three sturdy, but well-worn log buildings. Food was being served on tin plates handed out through the large window of a cabin used as a canteen. Smithy beasts labored to repair broken wagon fittings and applied grease to wheels. Here and there, Skull Buzzards kept watch over lines of trallés roped together, while handlers led the high-domed tortoises, 2 or 3 at a time, to the livery barn for water and to get their feet checked. Several Royal Patrol officers sat around a table on the porch of a two-story log inn, talking with a richly-dressed Wolf, near whom knelt four Mink servants.

Rows of peddlers' tents jammed a narrow alley between the inn and the livery. Bad Bone's attention was drawn particularly to a middle-aged female Wood Cow, who sat under a tree near the livery, carving wagon wheel spokes. Her bearing and manner were familiar —"she's a Wood Cow from the Hedgelands, or I have no sense in my head," he thought. Looking more closely, he could see that the Wood Cow's long white shaggy hair, falling down across her neck and shoulders, almost hid an iron collar encircling her neck. Through the shadows, his eyes could make out a chain attached to the collar. "Helga's mother! She's a prisoner!" Bad Bone breathed softly.

"A slave, you mean," Bormarojey whispered. "She's well-known to us—a legend, actually—name of Helbara. She caused some trouble for the High One many years ago, and she and her family were sold as slaves. When the Buzzards came to take them, she fought like a thousand demons to protect her family. In the end, they all escaped except her. The High One ordered her to be kept as his personal household slave—to humiliate her. But she sang such mournful songs and called so loudly on the Ancient Ones day and night, that no one in the royal household could sleep. He sent her to this remote caravan way-station, hoping that would be the end of her trouble-making."

Bormarojey paused as some Skull Buzzards looked a little too attentively toward their hiding place. They soon turned away, however, and showed no further sign of suspicion, so he continued his

story. “This is a perfect place for her,” he said, grinning at Bad Bone. “The High One has forgotten her, thinking that this distant exile was the end of her…Which suits our purposes fine!” he added with a slight chuckle.

“How does that poor beast being in slavery suit any good purpose?” Bad Bone asked.

“See the hat that Helbara is wearing?” Bormarojey asked. “You see the brim is rolled on one side? Rolled brim in front, the caravan is bound for Shell Kral; rolled brim at the back, it’s going to Hedgelands via Port Newolf; and if the hat is hanging on a peg, it’s going to Hedgelands via the Norder Passage. The reason we come here to scout is to learn which caravans we will raid later on!”

“She helps you to raid the royal caravans?” Bad Bone exclaimed, struggling to keep a low voice, despite his astonishment. “Don’t they get suspicious when their caravans constantly get robbed?”

“Here’s the deal,” his Squirrel companion replied. “We don’t raid all the caravans. There’s no pattern to our attacks. Even Helbara doesn’t know when we come to ‘cast the dead beast’s gaze’ on the way-station. She puts up her signals and never knows which ones we see—but she hears about the raids from the furious traders.” Bormarojey grinned widely. “The High One doesn’t suspect that the slave he humiliated and banished now guides Borf raiders to plunder his trallés!”

# Lost Hiker's Delusion

Bad Bone was puzzled. Something about the surrounding landscape seemed more familiar than it ought to be. The Borf party was returning over the same route they had traveled the day before and nothing had struck him as familiar on their earlier passage. He had never visited this region of the Hedgelands before. Why did what he was seeing now seem so very familiar?

As they trekked along on their return to Tramandrivot, Bad Bone's mind worked on this puzzle. Then, gradually the answer came to him. "Ah, yes," he thought ruefully, "the lost hiker's delusion." As an experienced mountain climber, well-schooled in the ways of the wilderness, he knew that his puzzlement resulted from the same problem that often caused inexperienced hikers to become lost. "The perspective is different coming and going," he thought. "Many a poor hiker has learned how very different the same mountains and trees look when approached from the opposite direction." This was the answer to his puzzlement. "What looked strange and new when we approached from the north, now looks familiar as we return from the south!" Yet, some of his puzzlement remained. "But why does it look familiar from this direction, when I've never walked this way before?"

He could not shake the mystery. Again and again he tried out possible solutions in his mind. Nothing seemed to answer the question. Then, when the party paused to rest and take food near a beautiful lake, he asked a question. "Does this area live in any of the legends you have heard?"

Bormaso, lying on his back under a tree, lazily pointed at a peak to the right of where they were stopped with the salted lizard tail he was gnawing. "That peak looks like a javelin point from this direction," he observed. "The grandmothers always tell us that the javelin point flies fast to where it is going. They say that in the ancient times the folk rode the javelin point to sail like the wind through the mountains..."

"...riding the great river that flows down from Javelin Point—standing up in boats that never touched the water," Bad Bone broke in, finishing the sentence.

Bormaso grinned. "Yes. I see you know the legend also."

"My grandmother told me the story as a wee beast," Bad Bone replied simply. "I never paid much attention to it, but the image of

beasts standing up in boats that never touch the water always seemed strange and wonderful—I've never forgotten it." He paused, gazing off at the peak that had become the focus of his thoughts. "And the javelin point shape of that peak is so unmistakable from the stories I heard countless times, that it looked familiar to me. I guess the legend had more effect on me than I realized," he chuckled.

The three friends lounged silently for a time, then Bad Bone spoke up. "Do you think perhaps there is such a river? I mean, one that makes the beasts fly through the mountains like it says in the old story?"

"I have sailed on it," Bormaso said quietly. "The river definitely exists."

"What?" Bad Bone exclaimed. "The legend is true?"

"Wait, wait!" Bormaso replied. "Not so fast. To say that the river exists is not to say the legend is true. There definitely is a mighty river that flows down off of Javelin Point. I have sailed on it—and a fearsome ride it is. Rapids such as would frighten most beasts to death...Unclimbable cliffs...Skull Buzzards...It's a terrible, terrible place."

"But you rode the river," Bad Bone said. "Where does it go?"

"That I cannot say," the Borf Squirrel replied. "As a young beast, I was captured by a Lynx slave trader during a raid and sold." Bad Bone's face showed pained surprise. Bormaso looked with kindness at him. "You surely know that some of the Lynx are slave catchers and traders, yes?"

Bad Bone looked away and did not answer. Bormaso, sensing that Bad Bone wanted a moment to himself, took a swig from the water pouch. He was wiping his mouth when his Lynx friend said, "My family has always served the High One, but we are Climbing Lynx, not slavers. I have served the High One honorably, but have never been cruel to any beast. I regret what other Lynx do, but they are not my folk."

Bormaso put a comforting paw on Bad Bone's arm. "I do not accuse you of being a slaver," he replied. "You are now a Borf brother and we have no reason to think ill of each other. I see it as a great sign from *The All* that a Lynx is now my Borf brother. Welcome, brother," he concluded, hugging Bad Bone around the shoulder.

The three scouts sat quietly together for a few moments, then Bormaso continued: "While being transported to the Hedgelands along the Norder Passage, our boat capsized and I escaped with several other slaves. Thus, I did not ride the river its full course, and it was a long time ago. I don't know where the river goes. I only know it must be the one mentioned in the legends."

"What do you know of the Norder Passage?" Bad Bone asked.

"There is an underground route that crosses from the Estates of the Norder Wolves to the Hedgelands. A portion of the passage follows an underground river—it's mostly used by slavers."

"Do honorable beasts travel that way?" Bad Bone asked softly.

"Not that I would know of," Bormaso answered. "There are actually several branches of the river and all except the Norder Passage are impassable. Even the Norder Passage is treacherous, but it can be traveled. The other branches of the stream are deadly. Because the Norder Passage is the only useable river, and it only goes to the Norder Wolf Estates, not many honorable beasts feel a calling to go that way."

Bormaso could see that his friend was suffering. "What's the matter, Bad Bone?" he asked.

"The legends about Javelin Point and the great river and the Norder Passage..." he began.

"What about them?" the Squirrel asked.

"The elders in my family tell of a Lynx of the bygone days," Bad Bone said, staring toward Javelin Point. "He was said to have gone to the Norder Estates traveling on an underground river—but we never really believed it. It seemed too fantastic!"

"He knew of the Norder Passage," Bormaso repeated thoughtfully.

"Apparently—does that surprise you?" the Lynx asked.

"The legend of Javelin Point and the mighty river are told by many folk," he replied. "But the Norder Passage is only known to slavers and trallé traders," Bormaso said. "If your ancestor knew about it, he knew more about that sort of trade than a simple Climbing Lynx would know."

So many thoughts swirled in Bad Bone's mind as he listened to Bormaso. A long obscured story was awakening within him. Listening to Bormaso jolted his mind. He recalled with wonder his experience at Stupid Frog Shallows a few years back. He learned that the Shallows—in the desolate wastes between the Borf lands and the Rounds—were rumored in bygone days to be a hideout for slavers. His own great-grandfather was connected with the Shallows in some way. Was Stupid Frog Shallows on the river of the ancient legends? In the misty past—was his great-grandfather a slaver?

"You think he was a slave trader?" Bad Bone asked quietly.

Bormaso smiled at his friend. "We never know what new faces we will find if we look deeply into our history," he said. "In a clan as old as the Borf, we've had our share of rascals and liars," he laughed. "The Lynx surely have some black-hearted scoundrels—but what you see when you look in the mirror is what is most important. There may be the tale of a slaver within you, but there are many other tales there also. Borf are a practical folk—we are interested in who you are now

and what you *will* be. Why take a long-dead slaver, who may or may not exist, into the clan, when you have shown us that you are a fine honorable Lynx ready to come on your own without him? We will take you for who you are and what you will be. Let the past die if it is no help to us—that is our way."

With this assurance to his heart, Bad Bone rose and gave his friends the Borf welcome greeting. "I welcome my Borf brothers into my own story. What else may be there, I cannot say, and may never know. But as you have embraced me as a brother, I, in turn, embrace you."

The three friends embraced heartily and, joking merrily, prepared to set out once again on their trek toward the Borf homelands. "Fill your water pouches, brothers," Bormarojey said. "This is the last lake we will see. We're into some wild and barren land now. There will be no beasts to be seen, and we will find but little water, until we reach Tramandrivot."

Little did the three friends realize, however, that a Wolf, descending a nearby hillside, quietly observed all that was done.

# Night Above the River

Shifting her pack from her back, Helga crouched on a narrow ledge breathing heavily. Leaning back, she lodged her body against an outcropping to keep from sliding backward. Her arms ached like never before, and her body was scraped raw where her clothes had been torn from rubbing against the rock. Alert despite her fatigue, Helga rested only briefly. “I can’t waste time,” she thought. “I don’t want to be on this rock wall when darkness falls.” Observing the position of the sun, however, Helga realized that she probably could not reach the top before dark.

She decided it was unlikely that a better place than the ledge could be found to spend the night. Making preparations for a precarious campsite, Helga lodged her flicker-pole into a crevasse at the bottom of the sloping ledge and wedged her backpack against it. This blocked any possible slide into the river. Helga was not worried about the pole breaking. She trusted the tree that had given the wood. The pole would not break.

Helga sat down leaning on the rock wall, wedged next to her backpack. She lay her soft cotton cloak down on her other side to make a place to sleep—clinging to the side of a cliff 2,000 feet above the river!

Rummaging in her backpack, Helga brought out a small yucca fiber and porcupine quill pouch. Opening it, she took out an oiled cotton package. Inside was a dark tan-colored lump—honey nut butter! She smeared some of the sweet tasting spread across a strip of trout jerky and gnawed on it, washing it down with a few swigs from her water gourd.

Feeling secure in her precarious perch, she considered the night that was coming. She had enough food and water to last at least two days more, and she felt certain she could reach the top of the cliff tomorrow. But she also was worried. Watching the sky, she saw signs of clouds gathering. If it rained, she had little protection. The cold mountain night would increase the risk. If her clothes became soaked, she could die from exposure. Calmly, but with urgent concern, she reviewed each item she had with her. How could she increase her shelter?

Not being able to climb with a heavy pack, Helga was traveling

light. The prospects were discouraging. She would have to rely on her wits to protect herself as well as she could and hope for the best. Feeling alone and helpless, she wished she could get help. Then an idea occurred to her. What about the flicker-pole?

Filled with new energy, Helga carefully shifted the backpack out of the way and lodged her own body where the pack had been. Then she wedged her back and legs securely against the two sides of the crevice to keep her precarious campsite from sliding into the river. When she felt that she was lodged securely enough to prevent a disastrous collapse of the campsite, she gently pulled the pole loose. Hoping that her plan would work, Helga began to work the flicker-pole in what was normally the 'weapon' style of use. Waving it in a way that made the end a blur of motion, an undulating, whisper-like song sounded across the cliff. Softly singing the ancient prayer songs she knew by heart, Helga rocked forward and back, working the staff with an almost surreal power and intensity.

For many minutes, nothing seemed to happen, but she continued moving with dogged determination. Dusk fell. Cold rain began to fall. Time was short. "Please, Ancient Ones...Help me," Helga murmured. Possessed with strength beyond her own understanding, she worked the flicker-pole with even greater power. Then they began to come: Pinion Jays, Canyon Swifts, and Rock Wrens from all corners of the canyons. Soon the calls and cries of the canyon birds were loud enough to drown out the music Helga was making. By the tens and hundreds they came, dropping from the sky in flocks to roost all around the crevice where Helga camped. Flock by flock they covered the crevice completely as bird after bird joined the serried lines, creating a complete protecting canopy over her campsite! The steady pelting of bird droppings was only a minor annoyance to Helga, grateful that she would survive the chilling rain. She spread her cloak to protect against the droppings and thanked the Ancient Ones for their help.

The Ancient Ones had discovered the power of the flicker-pole to attract birds. From times of unknown past, its tones had always called nearby birds to roost. Wherever they were, whatever they were doing, some deep language of the heart called them to join together in fellowship. When the music sounded, a great conclave of birds gathered around the pole. Coming in peace, but coming in vast numbers, this amazing roosting of birds had been used by the Wood Cows since ancient times as a means of defense. Even the most dangerous enemy did not want to be covered by hundreds and thousands of birds, however peaceful they were!

As the rain began to fall, the water slid from the feathers of the birds and fell harmlessly down the cliffside. There could not have

been a more effective protection against the rain! The body heat of the birds also helped to warm the bone-weary Helga. She wedged the flicker-pole back into position at the front of the ledge, returned the backpack to its position, and slumped in exhaustion. Slipping into a beautiful dream of being reunited with her father, Helga thought little more about what might lie ahead...

# Broken Eye and Slasher Annie

Broken Eye was hungry and tired. The Cougar and his wife, Slasher Annie, had eaten nothing but 'bandit's mush'—cricket paste mixed with cornmeal—for days. Lying as flat on the ground as possible, hastily burrowed under a covering of leaves, sticks, and pine needles, they tried not to breathe as some Grizzly Bear trackers passed nearby. Now they wouldn't have even bandit's mush to eat, having lost their supply satchels when the trackers surprised them.

"Them's get'in hot on ma'tail, them's is—Shouldn't hav' lost all ma'crew...ma'victuals..." Broken Eye's mind was wild with activity, even as he lay absolutely still under the covering of leaves. The wily Cougar did not let a moment waste as he considered the situation. As dark as the prospects looked, he felt a strange glee. His eyes burned with fire as he waited patiently for his pursuers to pass. Although the trackers were passing within a few feet of where he and Slasher Annie were concealed, Broken Eye was not worried. "Nay, ma'laddies...Nay...Nay. Old Broken Eye ish'nt done yet. We's some fun ta'have yet! Broken Eye didn't become what's he isht by bein' feared of a few fisheatin' bears. Nay, there bein's some fun in him yet!"

Broken Eye and his gang had been on the run for five weeks, barely stopping to rest. Sheer will kept them moving. Grizzly trackers, sent to hunt down Broken Eye's gang, were hot on his trail. One by one, Broken Eye had lost his Cougars to ambushes, poison darts from Grizzly blowguns, and claw-to-claw combat. The Grizzlies were sworn not to quit until they had wiped out the bandits. Now only Broken Eye and Annie were left. The trackers were closing in on them.

Broken Eye had eluded his pursuers so far by calling on every trick of cunning he had. But they were getting too close for comfort. He would have to do something spectacularly brilliant if he and Slasher Annie were to have a chance. His stalkers were so close to their hiding place that Broken Eye could almost count the individual hairs on the huge shaggy legs poking out between the top of the boots and the bottom of the leggings they wore.

Lying under the leaves as still as a rotting log, Broken Eye's mind was busy with feverish planning. Never one for fear and trembling, Broken Eye took each new setback as a chance to demonstrate his brilliance. His thoughts raced with plans for escape and fury against

his enemies. “Ya’thinks ya got me, ya’ugly loot robbers, but we’s got some fun left in us yet!” In spite of the danger, Broken Eye relished the challenge of outwitting the Grizzlies, whom he considered ‘loot robbers.’ “They’s a bunch of parlor bandits,” Broken Eye thought to himself. “We’s steal ma’loot fair and square, usin’ ma’brain and wits. And then these parlor bandits waltz in, as easy as ya’please, and steals it back from me! Surely we’s tell ya, it’s robbery! They say as if they will give it back to its ‘owners’—Well, we’s say him’as stole it first, owns it!”

As the trackers passed by his hiding place without incident, Broken Eye began to breathe again. Slipping out of hiding, a wide, wicked grin spread across his nearly toothless, badly scarred mouth. He shared his new plan with Slasher Annie. “Aye, ma’laddies, we’s got just the thing fer ya’s stupid loot robbers,” Broken Eye said. “Da’laddies will remember Broken Eye a long time. They’s don’t scare me. We’s hide only to think. When we’s know what to do, we’s no longer hide! We’s knows the plan. They will see Broken Eye in full sight, and they’ll be helpless ta watch us escape. They won’t be able to do anything about it. Nay, they won’t never forget Broken Eye!”

When he spoke this way, Annie knew her husband was no longer ‘right in his mind.’ He went into a kind of insane trance where he spoke and moved almost by instinct, without thought or fear. Once he knew what he wanted to do, he gave no further thought to obstacles, adversity, or danger. It was Broken Eye’s way. It had saved his skin many times.

As a young Cougar challenging for leadership of the bandit gang, he had spent six days in the wilderness with his paws tied behind his back. Although anyone could challenge to be bandit leader, few did. Such a challenge sent both the chief and his challenger into the wilderness for a test of craftiness and grit. Each was left deep in the woods, with their paws tied behind their backs. After three days, if one was still alive, he became head of the gang. If both were still alive, they were left for another three days, and so on until only one came out of the ordeal alive. With only one’s wits and courage to live by, the Cougars considered it a proper test of someone who would be a master of bandits.

Broken Eye had nearly died from thousands of mosquito bites he had received in that trial. When the ordeal ended, his body was swollen like a balloon when he crawled out of the forest on the last day. He had survived, but lost the sight in one of his eyes, which had swollen to the point of exploding. His challenger had not been so lucky. No trace of him was found except for some shreds of bloody clothing tied to a tree with barbed wire—the sign of Grizzly Bear trackers. So Broken Eye did not underestimate the Grizzlies.

“Annie,” Broken Eye called to his wife with a crazed look shining in his one good eye, “we’s going to do what a Cougar has never done before! We’s goin’ to surrender!”

Slasher Annie looked at her husband dubiously. “Surrender? There’s ten Grizzly trackers out there, Broken Eye! They’ll chop us into pieces!” But Annie knew it was no use, and, although it made no sense now, she did not doubt Broken Eye’s statement. Annie had seen many surprising tricks from the old Cougar.

“We’s givin’ up,” Broken Eye said slyly. “We’s givin’ up. We’s just walkin’ out there, white flag a’flutterin’. Then we’s have some fun!”

“But, Broken Eye, I don’t understand,” Annie replied. “Surrendering is fun?”

“Just don’t never forget who we’s be,” Broken Eye screeched. “We’s got a plan! The dumb laddies will never forget Broken Eye!” His tired, bloodshot eye bugged out insanely. His body quavered with excitement as his mate had never seen before. Pulling his battered red tricorne hat on his head, he grinned wickedly: “Aye, ma’laddies, we’s got fun.”

“AYE, MA’LADDIES, YA GOT ME THIS TIME, WE’S GIVIN’ UP! YA, HEAR US YA UGLY LOOT ROBBERS?” Turning to Annie, with a wild look in his bulging eye, Broken Eye said, “That should do it...They’ll be coming back our way. Now we’s got fun! Hold ma stuff, Annie, here comes some fun!”

Slasher Annie looked at Broken Eye questioningly. The powerful old Cougar was standing before her, slipping off the series of ribbons that held his three machetes slung across his shoulders. He gave the machetes to Annie to hold. Fumbling in the big pockets of his coat, he pulled out a coil of dried-grass fuse, a flint, and six gourds.

“Flash gourds!” Annie exclaimed. “That’s the last ones we have. What do they have to do with surrendering?”

“Ish’nt it ma fun?” Broken Eye laughed. “We’s be havin’ some fun with da loot robbers!”

Broken Eye quickly cut several lengths of fuse, and stuck them in every possible opening—in his ears, his mouth, his coat pockets, and his boots. Cougar bandits twisted strands of dried grass together in long braids. These were smeared with snake grease, which, when dried, made the twisted braids of grass sturdy, and turned them into effective, slow-burning fuses. Broken Eye carried a coil of fuse rolled up in his pockets, along with a number of flash gourds. Each was about the size of two fists and filled with pulverized grain dust. The dust was highly explosive. Each gourd contained enough to level a small-sized building. The homemade explosives were Broken Eye’s weapons of last resort. Flash gourds were completely harmless until the fuse was lit. Then they detonated within moments—depending on

how long the fuse was.

"Ha'rsh, Ha'rsh, Ha'rsh!" Broken Eye laughed as he worked quickly to ignite the fuses! "Yea, ma'laddies, old Broken Eye ish't really comin' ta surrender, but I guess I forgot ta tell ya that!"

Using his flint, Broken Eye put fire to all the fuses—both the ones on the flash gourds and the spare ones poking out of every possible opening. He stood before Annie with smoke pouring off of him. She was amazed to look at him. Broken Eye was always a terrifying sight. But now, he looked like a beast from someone's darkest nightmare. Annie was barely able to see him through the smoke that writhed around him. His bright red hat; long, billowing red coat; and red ribbons tied to the ends of his wild, shaggy braided beard added a sinister cast amidst the swirling smoke. With his badly scarred face, red eye-patch, and enormous height, Broken Eye was a terror to behold!

Slasher Annie herself could well understand why creatures fled at the very name of Broken Eye, even when he wasn't wreathed in smoke!

"Ya know me Annie...just don't ya be fearin'. Stay here and ready. We's be back straight away. Aye, and ya might put in some ear plugs!" With that, he walked straight in the direction of the trackers. Annie judged that the fuses on the flash gourds probably would burn about two minutes before they would all explode with a deafening blast! Flash gourds were used only rarely in Cougar bandit attacks—like blowing open a building to be plundered that could be opened in no other way. In those cases, usually they were detonated one at a time! They were far too dangerous to use in groups. Now Broken Eye had six of them lit, their fuses smoking out of his pockets! When they went off, they would level everything within a hundred yards. Annie pulled two small corks from her pockets and stuck them in her ears, then pulled the kerchief tied over her head down over her ears as far as it would go. There was going to be a tremendous explosion! Any right-minded creature would run for her life, but Annie stayed where she was. She knew that when Broken Eye got into these insane moods, he seemed somehow to know what he was doing—at least in the past. But he'd never done anything so foolish and daring as this.

Broken Eye walked out into a clearing in the woods and stood waiting. The trackers stopped at the edge of the clearing, obviously perplexed. They well knew the reputation of Broken Eye. He was crafty and very dangerous. What was this hideous, smoke-wrapped apparition about?

"Just hold it RIGHT there, ya LOUSY loot robbers!" Broken Eye screamed. "we's brINGIn' you some fun! we's givIn' up! we's SUrrendering! WE'S youR prisOner! WE'S just comIn' over TO

SURRENDER TO ma laddies! all THAT'S mine ISHT FOR you too! aye, we's got ma flash gourds for ya! mA pockets ish't full!" Broken Eye's ranting echoed through the forest.

The Grizzly Bear trackers looked at one another. They realized Broken Eye was a walking bomb! They well knew that even one flash gourd would be enough to kill or maim them all and Broken Eye obviously had many! The Grizzlies fled back into the woods, running pell-mell in frantic retreat.

"nay, ma laddies! iT ISHN'T easy ta get fAR ENOUGH away! Here's be some fun fOr ya loot robbers!" Laughing hysterically, Broken Eye tore off his coat with the smoking flash gourds in the pockets, and swinging it around over his head, heaved the coat upwards far into the air in the direction the Grizzlies had fled. Then he turned and ran as fast as he could back towards where Annie awaited.

The last thing Annie saw was Broken Eye, leaping towards her with a wild, gleeful grin on his face. He hit her with a forceful tackle just as the roar of a deafening explosion split the air! Earth, rocks, shards of wood, leaves and other debris rained down upon them. The force of the blast knocked down a massive tree just in front of them, which saved them from being crushed by others that fell.

Smoke and dust was still swirling as Broken Eye leaped up, grabbing Slasher Annie by the arm. "Aye, Annie, we's got's to go. Da'laddies be back. Nay time's ta'wastes."

In no time, Broken Eye and Slasher Annie were speeding away beneath the dense forest canopy. They moved like the wind. On and on they ran, putting miles between themselves and the scene of the explosion. They hoped the trackers would be stunned long enough to delay their pursuit. They heard no sounds of being followed. Grizzlies could not move as fast as Cougars on the run. Even if they were not hurt and able to move at high speed, they would make considerable noise if they were moving fast enough to keep up with the Cougars. At last, feeling they had left the Grizzlies far enough behind for some safety, and nearly exhausted, they slowed down, gasping for breath.

"I have no idea where we are, do you know, Broken Eye?" Annie asked.

"Nay, we's don't know. We'll just camp for the night. Come day's light, we'll explore. There be Skull Buzzards circlin' ahead. That might be some fun!"

Broken Eye knew that Skull Buzzards were native to only one place —the Don'ot Stumb Mountains. Few beasts went there because it was too dangerous. *"Go by land, you die. Go by water, you drown."*—he had heard the warning many times. Either way, the Skull Buzzards picked over your carcass and plundered your stuff. Most creatures thought those were not good odds. But not Broken Eye. He lived to cheat

death.

“Aye, Annie, tomorrow we’s visit the Skull Buzzards and see what they have that we’s want!”

# Cut Up Badly

A cool, gray morning dawned as Helga awakened from a sound sleep. The roosting birds had departed at the first red streaks of sunrise. She felt rested and refreshed as she sat up, carefully avoiding the mess of bird droppings that had showered the cloak during the night.

Feeling famished, she gave herself a couple pieces of jerky smeared with nut butter and then popped a rock cracker in her mouth. Sucking on the small and extremely hard sweet crackers provided a long-lasting source of energy. Helga liked sucking on one when she had hard labor to do. Popping one in her mouth, she shouldered her backpack again and began climbing. The going was difficult and dangerous—steep, precarious talus slopes covered the portion of the cliff just below the final vertical face. Progress was slow all day, as she constantly slipped on loose stones and slid backwards. Slowly her persevering spirit and strength prevailed. Little by little, she inched toward the top of the rock cliff.

As the shadows began to lengthen across the canyon, she was perhaps only 100 feet short of the top. Even that short distance seemed daunting to the exhausted young Wood Cow. Suddenly, however, she heard a voice call out: “Aye, Annie, if it ish’t a climbin’ beastie! Lookee here, Annie!”

Craning her head as much as she could to look upward without falling, Helga saw a creature such as she had never seen before peering over the edge of the cliff above her. A large, burly figure gazed down at her. In spite of the oversize, red tricorne hat that shaded most of his face, she could tell he wore a red eye-patch and had ribbons hanging amidst his tangled beard. “Well, well, ish’t looks to need some help, Annie…What ya think?” Broken Eye said gleefully.

“Why sure, Broken Eye, let’s give her a lift,” Slasher Annie replied. Pulling a long length of wild hemp rope out of her satchel, Annie made a loop in one end and fastened the other end securely around a nearby tree. Then she lowered the rope over the side of the cliff toward Helga.

“Catch the rope,” Annie called out to Helga. “Hook your arms through the loop and we’ll pull you up.”

“Thanks,” Helga called out gratefully, not knowing who was

helping her, but glad to at last be finishing her climbing ordeal.

Broken Eye and Annie worked furiously to pull the heavy Wood Cow to the top of the cliff. Gasping for air, they collapsed on the ground wheezing piteously as Helga pulled herself over the side of the cliff to solid ground once more. Her joy and gratitude knew no bounds. She cried with happy release from her struggle and joyously thanked her helpers over and over again.

Broken Eye and Annie continued to lie on the ground seemingly writhing in pitiful agony from their exertions. Their sorrowful state tugged at Helga's heart. She slipped off her pack and rummaged for water, offering it to them. They pretended to be too weak to drink it. Worried, Helga said, "Hang on, let me signal Papa that we have reached the top of the cliff. Once he knows we are safe, I'll find a way to help you."

Helga turned her back to release the willow-drum attached to her pack to use in signaling Breister. The instant she was bent over the pack, Broken Eye and Slasher Annie jumped on her, trying to overpower her. They wanted the pack and everything in it, imagining it must be filled with food. Helga fought with the strength of ten cow beasts. Her natural strength, added to her fierce desire to protect herself, made her a magnificent fighter. Unable to reach the flicker-pole, Helga resorted to Yeow-Yeow—the ancient Wood Cow martial art. Blow by blow, she skillfully mixed head-butts and lightning hoof strikes, pummeling her attackers. A ferocious battle raged across the head of the cliff. Broken Eye and Annie attacked Helga repeatedly from every side with their fearsome claws and machetes.

Helga fought valiantly, but could not withstand the sustained attack of two battle-wise Cougars in their prime. A machete slash to the shoulder here and a deep swipe of claws to the side there. At last, slashes and wounds covered her body. She sank to the ground. The treacherous Cougar bandits ransacked Helga's backpack but, of course, found little. Infuriated, they smashed the contents of the backpack: the willow drum, the water gourds, anything of value.

"Nay, Annie, ish't be nothing worth the butts we's took!" Broken Eye scowled. "We's took her down, but ish't a pity we didn't find better pickings."

"She said her Papa was down below," Slasher Annie mused. "She was going to signal him."

"She is a young beast...Ish't a parent below, ya mark my words," Broken Eye replied. "But why did she climb all the way up ta here and leave'ns 'im below?"

They looked at each other. The same answer was occurring to them at the same time: A stranded boat!

"He's probably run the boat aground. She'll be loaded with stuff!

Maybe he's hurted or somethin'. She's scoutin' the way out. He's guardin' some treasure stuffs, ya be sure of that, or we's not Broken Eye! Aye, Annie, easy pickins that will be, if we's careful." Broken Eye felt suddenly refreshed.

"We're better climbers than a Cow," Annie added excitedly. "We have a good length of rope. Working together, we can lower ourselves down quickly. We'll work at night while he's sleeping. Cougars don't have good night vision for nothing!"

"Aye, Annie. We's jump him while he sleeps." Broken Eye's one good eye bugged out wildly, gleaming in anticipation.

"What about the Cow?" Annie asked. "She's cut up badly."

"Good," Broken Eye said, his words dripping with callous contempt. "She won't be botherin' again."

With that, Broken Eye and Annie began to lower themselves down the cliff. They made rapid descent through the deepening darkness. The Cougars' natural agility, strength, and skill using ropes, well suited them to climbing on the sheer cliff face.

The bandits' plan to take advantage of darkness proceeded well. Their rapid progress seemed to assure their ability to ambush Breister in the dark. It would have worked perfectly, except for one small problem. About halfway down the cliffside, Broken Eye and Annie encountered an outcrop of rock that they could not pass so easily. It stuck out too far. This was a place where Helga had lost considerable time on her way up because she had to move a long way horizontally to get around the obstacle.

Surveying the situation, Annie noticed a route that Helga had also seen. "Broken Eye, there's a way to go to the side for a while, then down. We wouldn't need the ropes."

Broken Eye, however, was confident that there was a better way. "Isht too far, Annie, we's lose too much time that way. We's will use surprise and dark. Annie, we's will pull around this rock and you just hang on ta the rope. Let isht out slow when we's call for isht. Stay ready. We's will swing down, and swing out. When we's lands below the outcrop we's will call you. Then, we's hold the rope and you let yerself down. We's be past here right away."

Annie knew it was pointless to argue, so she wrapped the rope around a tree and braced herself securely, holding on to the other end. She would let Broken Eye down until he could find a landing place past the rock outcrop. Once he signaled that he was ready, he would hold his end of the rope and Annie would let herself down. When they both were past the outcrop, the rope could be pulled loose and recovered. Then, they would continue their descent.

Broken Eye let himself out over the outcrop and dangled freely out over the river. Little by little, Slasher Annie uncoiled the rope, letting

Broken Eye descend. At last, he was past the outcrop and ready to swing back to the cliff. In the darkness, he used his excellent night vision to look for a landing place. His attention was drawn to what looked like a perfect landing place—a wide ledge—and he swooped over for a closer look. Peering through the darkness, he saw that the ledge was not empty. Lighted with torches, it was teeming with Rabbits, Chipmunks, Mice and Packrats!

"What isht this?" Broken Eye fumed. "There isht no place ta land!" Unable to slow the rate of his swing, Broken Eye lifted his legs high and pulled himself up the rope as much as possible to try and miss the crowds of creatures. WHAM! SCHRUNCH! Broken Eye's heavy boots hit the rock wall above the creatures, sending a shower of pebbles and dusty grit down on the crowd.

Broken Eye, unable to land, pushed off the cliffside again, sailing out into space. As his pendulum arc reached its limit, he looked over the situation, trying to make sense of the scene. Swinging back, once again, toward the ledge, he saw wagons, carts, and a few buildings, in addition to the crowds. *Dry Gulch Saloon and Dance Hall* read one sign. *Porter's Dry Goods* read another. And *Mol's Blacksmithing* was dead ahead. It was apparently a small town, and business was bustling! Torches lit the crowded street that ran past the few buildings.

# Broken Eye Plunges

‘Hatchet’ Mol retired to Dry Gulch because of the peace it offered. Perched high up on a precipitous cliff, and hidden away under the protecting shelter of a huge rock outcropping, Dry Gulch was definitely quiet.

The old mining town had once seen some boom years after gold was discovered, but now it was nearly abandoned. A few dozen Rabbits, Mice, Chipmunks and Packrats—old prospectors, miners, shopkeepers, and some of their descendents—still lived in the town. Most of the week, not much happened in Dry Gulch. On Friday nights, other creatures from ’round about came to town to do marketing and have fun. Torches and lanterns lit the streets; farmers and artisans sold wares off the backs of their carts and wagons, friends and neighbors talked and laughed, and a little rowdiness spilled out of the saloon and dance hall. Friday nights were the highlight of the week for creatures around Dry Gulch.

Although Mol liked her peace and quiet, she didn’t begrudge her friends and neighbors the noisy Friday night festivities. She enjoyed the community spirit and even liked all the “little butter biscuits”—as she called the young ones—that climbed all over her, demanding stories.

“Tell us again about ‘Wild Roar,’ Hatchy Lady! We wanna hear how you sunk his ship and found his loot!” Strufee Mizzle howled loudly, tugging on Mol’s ears. Strufee was not alone. Five other small Rabbits and Packrats climbed on Mol’s lap or crowded around the barrel where she sat in her blacksmith shop. “Yeah! Missy Hatchy, tell us about Wild Roar and how you tied up his whole horde with a rattlesnake!” Strufee’s little sister, Yubbs, hollered. Friday nights, Mol was glad to oblige her small visitors, although she’d never touched a rattlesnake in her life! Her real exploits seemed to inspire the little “butter biscuits’” imaginations!

“Wild Roar the Tusk?” Mol asked in a whispered tone, cloaked in dramatic, but feigned, fear. “Do you mean the worst Boar bandit ever to terrorize peaceable creatures like yourselves? The fellow with two huge tusks capped with solid gold? The meanest scalawag to ever eat chopped up ears for his breakfast? The vilest, most dangerous desperado I ever tracked down? You mean that Wild Roar?” Mol

asked innocently.

"YES!" roared the Young'ins, looking at Mol with adoring, wide-eyed awe.

"Well, I don't know," Mol began slowly, giving each of the Young'ins a solemn look. "Do your parents know you're here? Do they know that I might tell you about how Wild Roar carried a blood-red sickle curved like a moon, that he used as a toothpick. AFTER HE CHOPPED UP EARS WITH IT!" Grabbing Strufee by the ear she asked in her mild, innocent voice again, "Do your parents know that?"

"YES!" the little ones chorused gleefully. "Our Mamas say, 'Go see Miss Hatchy, she'll tell you what happens to Young'ins that don't obey their Mamas!'"

Mol raised her eyebrows, and peered closely at the Young'ins. "So, do you little butter biscuits know what does happen to Young'ins that disobey their Mamas?" Mol moved her gaze slowly from face to face, then she said, "Well, I'll tell you what happens to 'em—They become terrible villains and desperados and then Hatchet Mol has to hunt them down. And when I hunt them down, why, I chase 'em day and night, day and night, until I catches 'em. I don't let bandits stop to eat, or drink, or sleep, and there's nowhere for 'em to hide. I'm so close behind 'em; they see me in every shadow. And when I catch 'em, I make sure they end up hanging by their ears in a deep, dark dungeon. When I'm done with 'em, they say, 'I should have listened to my Mama, I should have listened to my Mama,' for the rest of their lives."

"So, my dear little butter biscuits," Mol continued, "I'll tell you about one of the most famous, and dangerous, adventures I ever had...if you promise to be sure an obey your Mamas! Hatchet Mol doesn't ever want to have to come track you down because you turned into some dastardly character like Wild Roar or Broken Eye."

With the Young'ins clustered around her and listening anxiously to every word, Mol continued: "Now, Broken Eye is one of the nastiest, most cunning Cougar bandits that ever was. Once he was terrorizing and pillaging some WooSheep villages and they asked Mol to help bring him to justice. After a long chase, I cornered him and his sidekick, Slasher Annie. There was a ferocious fight...my hatchet against his machetes...We fought steel-to-steel for two solid days without rest, we fought across 30 square miles of country, battling up hill and down hill, through streams, through woods...Finally, my hatchet shattered the last of his three machetes, and I had him. I turned him over to the sheriff and he went to prison, but I hear he's loose and maybe up to his old tricks again..."

Hatchet Mol was Dry Gulch's most celebrated resident. A world-famous tracker and mountain beast, the aging Jackrabbit was still a household name. Long a popular hero, stories of her exploits were

legion. Mol had grown up in Dry Gulch during its boomtown days, helping her father in his blacksmith shop. Many mountain beasts, explorers, and adventurers of all sorts came through Dry Gulch in those days. Mol liked to hang around these daring beasts and listen to their stories. One of her favorite mountain beasts was a Grizzly Bear known as Wind Tracker Bart because it was rumored he could 'track the wind.' Bart taught Mol to throw knives and hatchets with deadly accuracy. By the time she was ten, she could slice cactus needles in half with a hatchet at fifty paces. Soon, the excitement and adventure of the mountain beasts and explorers captured her imagination, and Mol left Dry Gulch to follow their ways.

After a life full of danger and adventure, and tired of celebrity, Mol returned to Dry Gulch to live out her life. Taking over her father's small blacksmith shop, she sought to slip away into obscurity. She was happy making repairs to the broken tools and weapons that were brought to her smithy. On the side, she made exquisite custom hatchets—pearl handles, exotic wooden inlays, beautiful etching on the blades, specially designed blades...They were works of art. She had a fine collection of such hatchets mounted on the wall where they gleamed in the light of her forge. On Friday nights, Mol would sit on a barrel in front of her collection, surrounded by Young'ins, reliving her exploits, but grateful those days were finally in the past.

"Missy Hatchy," Gilly Mufft asked with a quavering voice, "what if Broken Eye comes to Dry Gulch?"

"Don't you worry your little butter biscuit head, Gilly," Mol replied. "Broken Eye would never dare come to Dry Gulch, and if he did..." Mol said with a stern, determined look, "He'd have to deal with Hatchet Mol! And that fat old coward doesn't want to do that!" Mol chuckled. The eyes of the Young'ins gathered around her were wide with adoring respect.

Mol was happy to tell stories about her past exploits, without having to actually confront the world's worst villains anymore. She sighed with contentment…then screams and shouts erupted outside! With Young'ins howling in terror, Mol rushed outside to see what was happening.

The street was in chaos. Creatures were scattering and scurrying in every direction, hollering in panic, and running for cover.

"Bandits! Run for your lives!" a Mouse yelled at Mol as he ran past in the swirling dust.

"If it's bandits, we must fight!" Mol yelled. "Save the town! Rally here!"

A few creatures that heard her stopped their rush toward the buildings. "What'll we do?" Gungo Packrat asked.

"I don't know," the old Jackrabbit replied. "Let's see what's

happening." Then she saw it. Although it was too dark to make it all out, she saw the distinct shape of a shadowy beast swinging toward Dry Gulch on a rope! As it got closer, understanding flooded into her mind. "Cougar!" she yelled. "It's a Cougar bandit! Grab whatever you can to defend the town!"

WHUMP! SCHREECH! Seeing that he could easily land on the ledge, Broken Eye did a rough, but upright landing on the main street of Dry Gulch.

As the Cougar bandit landed directly in front of her blacksmith shop, Mol quickly ran inside and grabbed several of the hatchets from her collection. Running back out in the street, she rapidly sized up the situation.

"Broken Eye! You old, worthless scoundrel! You came back so I could finish you off, eh?"

Broken Eye stopped short in his tracks. "Well, well, isht an old has been…Fancy mettin' you here."

"We're not meetin', Broken Eye, no slimy polecats are welcome here!" Mol replied. "You'll be leavin' now, or I'll be fillin' you full o' hatchets." Mol raised a deadly looking hatchet in her paw. Its blade glinted in the torchlight.

Mol looked around. Creatures of every age and size were gathering, brandishing every manner of weapon—torches, lanterns, knives, swords, machetes, scythes, picks, shovels, clubs, slingshots. The sheer numbers of those opposing the bandit, and their determined advance towards him, gave her pride.

The Jackrabbit smiled. "Now, Broken Eye, you have one chance to leave Dry Gulch alive," she said. "You can swing back out on your rope, and get out of Dry Gulch forever, or—" She paused and looked to the crowd around her. "Or, you can deal with us! It's your choice."

Broken Eye hesitated, then in a show of bravado, he snarled, "Ya's peace'ble 'fraidy beasts oughta go home to ya's Mamas. We's can slice you up! We's can chop you ta bits! We's can tear ya down ta fur and bones! We's can..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Mol finished it for him. "You can get out of Dry Gulch!" she roared. "Charge!"

The Dry Gulchers rushed Broken Eye as a single mass, spitting and bellowing threats and curses. Being hit by thrown torches and lanterns, Broken Eye's fur was smoldering in several places. One direct hit with a torch thrown by Gilly set his tail on fire. ZING! SWISH! ZING! ZING! A barrage of shovels, picks, spades and hammers flew at him from several directions, pelting him like hail. "OUCH! OOOCH! YEOW!" In addition to the crowd advancing on him, some town creatures were also throwing hot frying pans, kettles, irons and pots of coffee at him from windows. The mass attack took its toll. Broken Eye,

yelling in pain and fear, jumped off into the night sky clinging to his rope.

"Annie," he called desperately, "haul up da rope! Haul me up!"

But Mol had other ideas. Impressed with the spontaneous showing of courage from her Dry Gulch friends, Mol had reserved her hatchets, in case they were really needed.

"Well," she mused, "this is a perfect use for my skills." As Broken Eye dangled in open space waiting for Annie to haul him up, Mol said, "Would all the Young'ins help me please? I'd like you all to carry torches and lanterns over to the rim of the cliff. Gather all the light you can there, I need to see the rope holding Broken Eye."

The Young'ins scurried to the rim, carrying every type of torch and lantern they could find. The light bathed Broken Eye. Mol, who could still split a cactus needle at fifty paces, took careful aim on the rope.

"Annie, Annie, hurry up!" he howled piteously. He inched upward as Annie pulled on him with all her might.

Mol's skills were still sharp, however. Her aim was sure, and Broken Eye dropped out of sight with a long, long howl.

Somewhere in the darkness above, Slasher Annie fell backwards as the weight was suddenly removed from the rope she had been pulling...

# Caught in a Tangled Web

"YEEEEEEOOOOW!" Annie listened to the long, long howl that could only be one thing: Broken Eye falling through thin air. Somehow the rope had snapped or been cut.

"Well, I guess that's the end of him," Annie said to herself, not without some glee. "Poor old good-for-nobody. I hope he takes a nice big bounce! Now, I can finish the job and take the loot for myself! You stupid fool," she thought, "if you had only listened to me and taken the longer route, you might still be around."

Coiling the remaining length of rope over her shoulder, Slasher Annie began to descend the cliff again, this time moving horizontally to go around the outcrop.

After three hours of climbing, Annie had worked her way around the overhang and was nearing the base of the cliff. Moving especially quietly through the dark, Annie chose her moves carefully so as not to dislodge stones that might alert her intended prey. Navigating the rocky cliff was very treacherous in the pitch darkness, even for a Cougar. But Annie lost her balance and nearly pitched off the cliff into the raging river below, when a voice spoke to her unexpectedly out of the darkness!

"So, Annie, what took ya so long?" Broken Eye! The resilient old Cougar grinned up at Annie. A tree, rooted at an odd angle into a crack in the canyon wall, had caught the back of his pants in his desperate fall. The way in which his pants had snagged on the tree was very precarious. Broken Eye clutched the waist of his pants tightly to keep the snag from slipping off. This made it impossible for him to free himself from the branches. "Got's some rope?" he asked.

Annie, startled by Broken Eye's unexpected whisper, considered what to do.

"You old fool!" she whispered back angrily. "I should just leave you there to rot! If we hadn't followed your idea, you wouldn't be hanging there like that. I should let you be food for the Skull Buzzards."

"Nay, Annie, ma girl...ya not goin' ta leave old Broken Eye here," the Cougar replied. "Ya know too well, that isht a long ways ta anywhere. Ya needs old Broken Eye. Ya'll be food for ta Skull Buzzards by yourself!"

Slasher Annie sighed deeply within herself. What Broken Eye said

was true. This wild, rough country would be very dangerous for her to challenge alone. Her chances were better with Broken Eye than without him.

Moving gingerly, Annie maneuvered so that she was lodged behind a boulder. She tied the rope securely around the boulder and lowered herself down to Broken Eye. Wrapping another rope around his middle, she knotted it and then pulled herself, paw-over-paw back up.

"All right, Broken Eye," Annie whispered tersely, "as I pull you up, you should pull loose from the tree. If you have to, leave your pants behind."

"Aye, aye, ma Annie girl," Broken Eye said, "we's knew ya weren't a black-hearted dog! Always so lovin' and concerned!"

Not far below, Breister was deeply worried about Helga. Why did he not hear something from her? If there was no signal by daybreak, Breister resolved to climb the cliff himself to look for his daughter. Having a boatload of household goods meant nothing to him without Helga. For a long time he played Helga's pronghorn flute that she had left with him. She was teaching him to play it. As he stumbled over the notes in his imperfect practicing, sweet thoughts of her playing at the hearth back at home filled his mind. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Later he tried to rest, but his sleep was troubled. All through the night, images of wild-faced cats chasing Helga disturbed his dreams. Unable to sleep, he sat on the ledge gazing out over the rushing river. Rocking forward and back in the traditional Wood Cow manner, he sang the ancient prayer songs calling on the Ancient Ones to help his beloved daughter in whatever danger she was facing.

As dawn began to break, Breister decided to cast another longing look up the cliffside to see if there was any sign of Helga. The last thing he saw before he pitched off the ledge into the river was two wild-faced cats springing at him out of the semi-darkness above his head. Becoming aware of their presence moments before they sprang at him, Breister had time to reach in his pocket and bring out his fishing line and swing it in defense. The force of the Cougars hitting Breister stopped the swing of his arm in mid-stroke. But it was enough. The sinker-weighted fishing line swung wildly around Broken Eye as he hit Breister. Wrapped in a tangled web of fishing line, Broken Eye and Breister sailed off the ledge. Bound tightly together, they struggled in the raging river until they disappeared under the crashing waves of the rapids, and were seen no more...

Slasher Annie could not believe her good fortune. "Mine! Mine! This time, for sure, it's all mine!" she said to herself with glee as she looked at the fine boat and its cargo. "This will serve very nicely to set me up in a new life, far away!" she exulted. "Soon, I launch the boat

and find my destiny. I'm free of this miserable life at last!"

Far above, Helga moaned in fitful unconsciousness. Her terrible wounds mercifully caused her to sleep deeply. In her dreams she saw herself walking and talking with the Ancient Ones. They motioned to her to come into their homes and be welcomed by the fireside of eternity. But each time they beckoned to her, the dreamy, distant notes of a flute disturbed her sleep. At last the dreams came no more and she slept.

*Book Two*
# Reunited and Combined

## Where It Came Out, No One Knew

As the morning sun rose above the mountains, Slasher Annie considered her good fortune. “A fine boat filled with worthy goods and enough fresh trout to last me several days. I don’t know where this river goes, but it doesn’t matter. When I find a place I want to stay, creatures won’t guess who I am. I’ll just be Annie, a respectable traveler. I’ll settle in and melt out of sight. I too can live by my wits.”

Feasting on the fresh trout that the unfortunate Breister had caught, Slasher Annie felt full in the belly for the first time in weeks. “Poor, poor, old Broken Eye,” Annie said mockingly. “He always had to be first in line. Putting yourself first is not always the best,” Annie laughed. “He was a bit too hasty this time…Sleep well, Broken Eye, don’t let the fish nibble your toes! Har, Har, Har!”

Pulling the last fish bone out of her mouth, Annie stepped into the boat and loosened the rope that secured it. Annie had never been on a boat before and knew nothing about sailing, but she was not worried. “If stupid Cows can sail, a Cougar can do it better! You stand here at the rudder and steer. I can do that.”

As soon as she loosened the rope, the boat was sucked into the raging current. Annie realized she had been a fool. She could not control the boat. No matter how she moved the rudder, the vessel spun wildly in the current, banging hard on massive rocks, filling with water, careening with dizzying speed down through huge cascades of water. Only the fact that the boat had been built with great sturdiness and fine wood kept Annie afloat. As she began to overcome her initial panic, she realized that perhaps things would be OK. The craft was sturdy. Although it was hitting rocks with crashing power, the wooden hull was not splintering. Water rose above her ankles. Annie thought

that perhaps if she bailed, she could keep it from rising enough to sink the boat. Battling her sickness, she bailed hard.

Her feverish work had little effect. For all the water she threw out, a greater amount poured in. At last, she could see it was hopeless. Knowing it would be suicide to abandon the boat, she settled down to wait and gather her strength to swim if she must. Either the vessel would eventually break apart on the rocks, fill to overflowing and go down—or perhaps she would reach calm water before either of these things happened. In any case, she needed to gain strength. There was nothing else to do.

Struggling to keep her nauseous stomach under control and feeling dizzy and disoriented, Annie crouched in the bottom of the boat. Her eyes were closed in a grimace of discomfort as her stomach sloshed as tumultuously as the river around her. At last, unable to control her seasickness any longer, Annie grabbed the gunwale and, leaning over the side, violently spewed her recent breakfast into the river. Gasping and wheezing, the miserable Cougar hung weakly over the side.

Feeling less and less in control of her wits, Slasher Annie limply raised her head to identify a new sound. Her distracted mind, at first, thought it was seeing things. A wide sandy beach was just ahead! The boat was no longer pitching violently. The water, although still moving swiftly, was no longer tormented by rapids. If she could just get to the beach she would be safe!

Finding new life, Slasher Annie picked up an oar and began to row with all her strength. Yet, no matter how strongly she rowed, she was not able to close the distance. And the more she tried to reach the beach, the more she observed what was on it. Skull Buzzards! Dozens of the large evil-looking birds were perched on the sandy bank or circling overhead. Some were picking over the bones of a carcass. One Skull Buzzard caught her attention in particular. He was strutting around, sporting a battered red tricorne hat on his head!

Feeling a growing sense of inevitable doom, Slasher Annie stopped rowing. Sitting listlessly, she once again let the current carry her as it would. An increasingly loud *SHHLUUURRSH* pulled her attention to a monstrous whirlpool that was slowly, inevitably drawing her towards it. She did not resist. Sitting motionless, her mouth open, tongue hanging out, drool dripped down the front of her coarse cotton coat. Her closed eyes no longer watched as the yawning whirlpool pulled her vessel toward its depths. Slasher Annie had lost consciousness—her brain shut down by terror—long before the craft was smashed to a zillion pieces as it was sucked into the vortex. Pulling the entire river underground, the whirlpool let nothing escape, except for luckless creatures that were picked out of the water by Skull Buzzards before they reached the eye of the whirlpool. After that, not even a Skull

Buzzard was strong enough to pull something out of the current. Not even mist escaped into the sky from where the river plunged deep underground. Where it came out again, no one knew.

# Eating Grubs and Beetles

The brilliant morning sun was insistent, stirring Helga from her sleep. She winced immediately—pain shot through every inch of her body. Her shoulders, legs and back felt like burning coals were buried in them. Slowly, she tested her movement. Pain and more pain. She could not move her legs, and one of her arms seemed useless.

Remembering what had occurred, she looked around to see if her attackers were still present. No one could be seen. She remembered vaguely that she had seen them going over the side of the cliff during a brief fit of wakefulness.

"Papa!" she thought solemnly. Then her sense of practical courage went to work. "Well, I'm no good to Papa now. If the All allows, the Ancient Ones will assist him. I've got to see to my wounds." Helga realized that there was nothing she could do for her father now. She must place her focus on protecting and healing herself.

Unable to stand on her mangled legs, and weak from her wounds, Helga dragged herself toward some nearby bushes. The ground was damp around them and inching a little further, Helga found a trickle of water. Somewhat further on, she also found some Raven berries. Filling one of her pockets with the fruit and soaking a piece of torn cloth in water, she struggled back to her pack.

She greedily stuffed the fruits in her mouth and soon her mouth was stained with purple juice. Using the piece of water-soaked cloth, Helga cleaned her wounds as best she could. Using some of the birdwood leaves that she always carried rolled up in her leggings for emergencies, she packed leaves and mud on the worst of her injuries. Birdwood poultice was known for its healing properties. The soothing effect strengthened Helga to drag her belongings over into a shady spot.

By the time she had done these things, Helga was exhausted. Terribly weak and with only one of her arms and legs working, every activity drained her energy. Finding a few pieces of rock crackers in her pocket, Helga lay down, sucking on the rock crackers while she rested. "Well, I'll just rest a while until the heat of the day passes. Then we'll see." Pulling her wide-brimmed hat over her eyes, she slipped into a peaceful doze.

Later, able to sleep only fitfully, Helga considered the situation. She

did not know exactly where she was. Somewhere in the Don'ot Stumb Mountains, she knew. From the higher vantage point she now had at the top of the cliff, she could see that the mountains went on and on. Somewhere, though, she knew the mountains ended to the east. With her mobility so limited, she could not see as much as she wished, but she knew her hope lay in the direction of the rising sun. "We began this journey with our faces set toward the new day," Helga thought grimly, "and we will not leave that hope behind. I think not of the past, but of the future. No matter what may have happened to Papa, I cannot live in the past and in fear. I will live in hope and for the future. This was our pledge when we left the Hedgelands, and I will not turn from our decision." Helga felt that, even if she were not to see her father again, this was the choice he would also make in such circumstances.

From that time on, Helga moved toward the east. Each day, for the next month, Helga dragged herself toward the rising sun. To conserve energy and water, she traveled only a few hours in the morning and a few hours just before and after sunset, when it was cool but there was enough light to see the way. Little by little, each day Helga's wounds improved. As she changed the mud and birdwood leaves dressing each day, she saw injuries that looked less ugly and she was freer from pain. But the deep damage was done. Her legs would not work fully and she had trouble controlling the use of one of her arms. Nevertheless, little by little, Helga learned to make the best of her arms.

Day after day, she half-crawled and pulled herself over the rough terrain. Living mostly on wild cherries and berries, Helga was gradually able to forage more widely as she gained strength. Sometimes she would find the carcasses of large pike and trout that eagles had caught but had only partially eaten. Making a small fire with her flint and some dried grass; she would roast the fish and hungrily feast on it.

As the days wore on and Helga steadily gained strength, she was able to increase her rate of travel. Each day now, she covered what she guessed was more than a mile. Her improved rate of progress, however, was still far too slow. Her clothes were quickly falling into tatters and the night temperatures were cold. She knew that she would have to do something else.

On the 14th day after the attack, Helga decided that she must try to stand. Using a tree to pull herself upright, excruciating pain shot through her legs. Gritting her teeth, she held on. Feeling dizzy and with tears filling her eyes, she tried desperately to maintain her balance. "DO NOT PASS OUT, HELGA! DO NOT PASS OUT! CALL ON THE ANCIENT ONES!" she commanded herself silently. Gradually,

several minutes of shakiness passed. Helga's legs were painful but, clinging to the tree, she found that she could steady herself.

Feeling greatly encouraged by her brief experiment, Helga slumped back to the ground. She realized that with the help of some support, she could learn to hobble. It might be painful, but at least she would make better progress. She had to be out of the mountains by winter or perish. Even without the onset of winter, the risks were great. Her best hope was to go on and find some kind of settlement. Surely the lands before her were not completely uninhabited.

Despite her grim prospects, she felt strangely happy. "The pain is not enough to stop me," she thought happily. "I was afraid that my legs would not hold me up, but I can hobble along. By the power of the Ancients, I think I can get through this..." Helga leaned back against a tree and began to consider her next move.

She planned to use her flicker-pole as a walking stick, but thought her progress would be faster if she could make a comfortable armrest for it. By the end of the day, she had located a sturdy scrub oak branch. She used a large rock as sandpaper to fashion a detachable armrest piece that attached to the flicker-pole, so she could use it more easily as a crutch. Helga picked this particular branch because it looked strong and had a curiously pleasant sound coming from one of its gnarled curves. Helga, in all her years as a Wood Cow, had never heard such a sweet, but unusual, tone in a piece of wood. It sounded like it would make a very comfortable crutch. Now her flicker-pole could be used both as a staff and as a crutch. Helga found that with this additional help, she could now make perhaps two miles a day. Still not great, but better.

She wondered if she would ever find help. How could she possibly survive in the wilderness like this? Although her wounds had gradually healed, she was losing weight from lack of proper food. The little food she could locate was mostly fruits and roots and sometimes a bit of scavenged fish. Lately, there had been no fish and she was reduced to turning over rocks and rotting logs to find grubs and beetles. When she found nice, fat grubs, she squashed them and squeezed the slippery goo through a piece of cloth, straining it. This she mixed with pollen she collected to make a paste. Adding some cherry juice made the taste palatable. Although it was surprisingly nutritious, she continued to lose weight and spent more time each day gathering food. It took a lot of grubs, pollen, and fruit to make enough paste to feed her. How long could she continue?

# The Power of Enigma

Helga was lying in the shade of an aspen grove, taking a breather and listening to the pleasant music of the rustling leaves, when a different sound attracted her attention. *Aahhhooo…oooooo…aaaahhhoooo…ooooo…ladooooooo…ladoooo…* The sound was musical and soothing; it made her happy to hear it.

Struggling to a standing position, Helga picked up her pack and hobbled off in the direction of the music. “Creatures! Someone is playing music! Creatures!” Helga was so excited that she stumbled forward wildly, overjoyed at the thought that after so much suffering and trouble, help might be at hand.

Crashing through the brush, half-staggering, half-hobbling over rocks and fallen logs, Helga came upon a most startling sight. At the side of a beautiful mountain lake, a Wolf was hanging upside down by his feet, playing a flute! Helga stopped in amazement. She was speechless.

*Aahhhooo…oooooo…aaaahhhoooo…ooooo…ladooooooo…ladoooo…* The music from the flute was simple and softly cheerful. In deep concentration of his playing, the Wolf had not noticed her, despite the noise Helga had made barging through the brush.

The Wolf was hanging in a perfectly vertical position, with his feet hooked over a tree branch, about ten feet above the ground. He was dressed in a loose-fitting, light green shirt and trousers, each with ruffled ties around the wrists and ankles to keep the garment in place while he was upside down. He wore a dark green sash around the waist. Helga noticed what appeared to be another dark green garment and some sandals on the ground under the tree. The flute was perhaps two feet long.

Helga stood for a time listening to the soothing music. She dropped her pack to the ground and sat down. It seemed wonderful that so strange a musician, with so simple an instrument, using nothing but air, could have such power over the heart. Helga felt as if the beauty of the scene and the melody of the flute were drawing all the struggles and pain of her days since leaving the Hedgelands away from her mind. Hunger and weariness vanished, and only as the sun fell lower in the sky did the flutist at last stop his playing. How many hours had passed? Helga did not know.

Suddenly, in one somersaulting leap, the Wolf had swung free of the tree and landed before her.

"And now yor best coome along with me," the Wolf said. "Where have yor coome from? The mounts, those awful mounts, I'll be born. What were yor doin' there? Aiean, moony a poor body has been lost in those tumbled, coold, wildy mounts and never been foound."

When Helga began to explain how she had come to be there, the Wolf raised his paws to stop her. "Aiean, it's enough to know by the mercy of the Ancient Ones yor ever got oout. Comin' along with me." The Wolf slipped on the sandals and the dark green habit-style garment that had been lying under the tree.

While he did so, he let Helga hold his flute. It was beautifully made from aromatic red cedar. It had a long fringe running its entire length —the fringe was made of tassels strung with beads. She admired its beauty and longed to play it herself, but the Wolf said, "Wherever yor find there be music, the music be comin'...yor don't need the flute. Findin' the music first, then the flute be comin' to the music!"

Slipping the instrument in a special pocket in his habit, the Wolf said, "My name be called Ola. Comin' aloong now...Give me yorn pack. We'll be getting' you out of these mounts." Helga handed her pack to Ola. He led her some distance through the rugged, but beautiful land. After a scrambling climb up a long hillside, they reached the top of a high ridge, and looked out over a vast reach of wetland valley reaching to the horizon. The end of the mountains!

They went a short distance down the far side of the ridge, leaving the high wall of the Don'ot Stumb Mountains to their backs. Ola walked slowly, allowing Helga to set the pace with her hobbling gait. He said nothing more, but walked with a dignity and kindly spirit that gave Helga more and more confidence in his goodness. As they walked along, Helga's curiosity overcame her and she said, "Ola, where is your home?"

"The world bein' such a wide-big world, the robe and the flute is my home, Misst Helgy," Ola replied. Helga learned that Ola was a Gateless Wolf novice. The Gateless Wolf was one who practiced the ancient Wolf art called Enigma. Enigma was a nonviolent martial art in which the warrior used the power of riddles and anomalies to defeat an enemy, sometimes engaging in intense duels with an adversary using riddles as the only weapon.

Ola looked Helga intently in the eyes with the happy, but serious look that was characteristic of him. He gave her an example of Enigma: "You don't often be seein' many creatures in the wilds you came through—not even the Borf be comin' there. But three days before you saw me at the lake, I be findin' a Borf scoutin' party there. And a fine Lynx was leadin' it—and wearin' the Borf clothing. Well,

Misst Helgy, I'll be a tellin' you...there's never been a Lynx among the Borf a'fore that...and a fine Lynx he was, too. But, I'm tellin' you it was a deep, deep work of Enigma—a Lynx bein' a Borf clanbeast? Lynx and the Borf bein' together is like makin' something from fire and snow...it's a deep work of Enigma. I had to meditate on that powerful enigma for three days to understand it. Then you show up, and that's my answer. I needed a deep enigma to be keepin' me there by that lake long enough to help you. Without that enigma, you'd probably still be wanderin' in the wilds." Ola paused and smiled at his friend. "That's the power of Enigma."

Novices taking the path of the Gateless Wolf roamed the world freely, especially the remote wild areas where they could practice the disciplines of Enigma. The path of the Gateless Wolf had grown out of the violent traditions of the old clans of warrior Norder Wolves. Stressing physical endurance, artistic discipline, service to others, and the practice of Enigma as means to realize personal powers, they were renowned for their uncanny ability to be nearby when travelers were lost or creatures needed help.

Full-fledged followers of the Gateless Wolf path could hang by their feet from the edges of cliffs for days on end, playing their flute and solving enigmas. But, Ola explained, Gateless Wolves were not hermits. Whenever they passed through a community, they worked hard at whatever was needed: fieldwork, gardening, building or repairing cabins, caring for the young, cleaning, cooking, or whatever.

Ola's happy, good-natured strength made Helga think of her father. It seemed as if Ola helped her long unhappiness to fade. Somehow she felt that meeting Ola was helping her to find peace with the loss of her parent. She wondered if he had survived the treachery of the Cougar Bandits. Perhaps he had been able to escape in the boat. If he had, he might be alive and looking for her. Her father was a powerful Wood Cow and armed with his fishing line. Unless he was surprised or ambushed, Helga knew that he would be a formidable foe for the Cougars. Yet, she herself was strong and quick-witted...and she had been overwhelmed by the treachery and brutality of her attackers. What if they had used the same tactics on her Papa? She did not want to think of it. Yet somehow, the spirit of the Gateless Wolf brought peace to her mind.

As they walked, leaving the highlands behind, the edge of the vast wetlands stretched away before them, seemingly without end.

"I'll be paddling into the Drownlands, Misst Helgy," Ola said. "It's the season for the trading people to be migrating. There's need to help the lost and trooubled traveling beasts."

"I'll be coming with you, Ola, if you'll have me," Helga replied. "I'll not stay behind to wander aimlessly. At least you wander with a

purpose of helping lost beasts. Maybe I will find Papa's path, and maybe I won't, but at least I'll be trying to help those who are lost and hurting. That will be more to Papa's spirit than wandering without purpose."

"Aiean, Helgy, that be the path," Ola smiled. "That be'in the path..."

# King Stuppy's Trading Post

Ola and Helga paddled slowly into the small settlement Ola called "King Stuppy Marit's Tradin' Poost." Ola knew the place. He'd visited many times in his years of roaming through the Drownlands as a wandering monk. He especially liked the Drownlands, in spite of the fact it "drew a bad-bad lot" as he said.

"The Drownlands are wilder than anythin' nor any placin'," Ola said. "Cuoog'er Bandits and thievin' creatures of every kind. They all are at home at Stuppy's."

As they paddled into the Drownlands wilderness—a vast, uncharted wilderness of lakes, marshes and bogs—Helga hoped the trip might help her find her missing father. Ola told her that, "There's only one spot that's goot any beasts that might be goin' to know anythin'...that's goin' to be King Stuppy's, that's goin' to be the crossroads of all the travelers and spies."

Helga trusted Ola completely, but she wondered how they would ever find anyone in the vast wilderness. They had been paddling for more than a week in Ola's dugout canoe, following endless bayous and channels that he seemed to know well. They had met no other creatures, although they had seen several shanties that Ola said were used by itinerate Bayou Dogs who fished and collected wild marsh honey. "The Bauyoo Dogs never stay put. They're always floatin' and movin'," Ola explained. No beast 'stayed put' in the Drownlands, Ola said. Everyone kept moving, following the best fishing, finding the marsh honey, collecting the berries and mushrooms in their seasons. Ola explained that there were "loo'ts of the creatures" around, but they were an independent lot that valued their freedom. Many of them were either sent to the Drownlands instead of jail, or escaped there to hide out. "But they all be comin' to King Stuppy's at the tradin' time."

Ola came to the Drownlands each spring and autumn, during the great trading seasons. He always found travelers in need of help at trading time. "The creatures are always in troouble with the bandits and getting' lost," Ola explained. "There's always a need for Ola." Wandering the Drownlands, he meditated, played his flute, and rescued travelers in trouble.

Among the maze of bayous and lakes, time seemed to stand still. The sheer isolation and vastness of the Drownlands seemed to make

yesterday, today, and tomorrow useless ideas. Underground springs created a lush wetlands. Expanses of grass and reeds were interspersed with groves of giant trees that towered above the wetlands in places. Here and there were snaking runs of lesser trees and scrub bushes along bayous. Any effort to leave the canoe seemed pointless—there was little solid ground, much quicksand, and the grass was impenetrably thick. The streams, lakes and bayous were the only 'roads.'

Helga could understand why Ola said this was a land of hideouts. A bandit could easily lose himself here and never be found.

Finally, after seven days, Helga noticed signs of commerce. Other canoes, small boats, and large flat-bottom barges pushed with poles gradually became more and more frequent. All were filled to overflowing with creatures and goods, many loaded so heavily that they seemed in danger of capsizing. Where there had been hardly a sign of life, now there seemed to be boats of every description coming from every direction.

King Stuppy Marit's Trading Post was the only permanently inhabited outpost in the Drownlands. The nearest trading center other than King Stuppy's was more than a week distant by canoe. If it had to do with commerce or trade, it came to King Stuppy—including assorted 'bad goods' from theft and banditry. Stuppy's sign said it plainly: "KING STUPPY MARIT'S TRADING POST—We Buys It All, And Sells It All; Keep Your Questions To Yourself!"

As their canoe nosed up to the dock, Helga did not feel good about what she saw. Surely there were a great number of honest traders here, but the sly and sinister face was everywhere. Boats, so loaded with passengers that they hung off the sides, also bristled with machetes, cutlasses and pikes. Apparently a safe voyage was not always assured. One large, flat-bottomed boat loaded with Jackrabbits, Muskrats, Beavers, Geese, Raccoons and Coyotes—and every space between them crammed with bags of cornmeal, oats, pinenuts, and barrels of pickled fish—flipped over with a huge 'SPOOLSH!' sending passengers and goods into the water. Quickly, small pirogues of King Stuppy's Dock Squirrels rowed out to help the unfortunate creatures and rescue what could be saved of the cargo. Helga thought it was a miracle that more boats did not swamp, so amazingly overloaded were they.

Creatures came down out of the isolated bayous and lakes twice a year, loaded with all the things they had grown, made, stolen, or caught. King Stuppy operated ferryboats that he sent up some of the largest bayous—to the North in the Spring and to the south in the Fall—picking up passengers along the way, bringing them to his trading post. Since there was only one ferryboat trip, out and back, each year,

they packed every possible passenger aboard. And the cargo! Piles of ornately woven grass mats, hats, and bags. Sacks of meal and grains. Barrels of candied berries and ciders. Finely-made and rustic furniture. Crates of dried mushrooms. Cases of pickled roaches and beetles. Baskets of turtle eggs. Vendors hawking brightly colored pants and shirts from the boat—small canoes coming out to buy as the boat moved along. Sometimes, the ferries would have racks of huge catfish hanging, drying by the dozens in the sun, as Barge Goats poled the vessel along.

The smells and sights were so intense that it made Helga woozy. Although she'd lived a hard life and endured great hardships, she still could not comprehend the dirt and filth at King Stuppy Marit's. Drooping moss overhung everywhere, giving the place a damp, half-rotted feeling. Inside the public house, the walls and ceiling were caked with layer upon layer of residue from cooking fires and pipe-smoke. Rough tables were smeared with spilled food and littered with dirty tin plates piled high with gnawed bones and gristle, crusts of coarse bread, and the scooped-out skins of baked lizards. The floor was wet and slippery from many spilled tankards of Drownlands Grog. Piles of filthy burlap sacks were scattered here and there with creatures lounging on them smoking long clay pipes and drinking Ale. King Stuppy's establishment did not impress her.

Though she had been raised from age five by Roundies—and had seen many different kinds of life—Helga retained the cleanly manners of her native Wood Cow folk and found King Stuppy's Trading Post revolting. She was a Wood Cow at heart. Although she would never forget the Roundies who had rescued her, loved her, and cared for her, she did not expect to ever see them again.

# A Certain Cantankerous Wood Cow

So many urgent problems pressed on Helga's mind now, that the Rounds were only a distant, but fond, memory. A stronger memory was the vicious attack she had suffered from the Cougar bandits. The edge of this memory cut through any musing Helga might have had about the Rounds as they tied up their canoe at King Stuppy Marit's dock—it was crawling with Cougars!

Helga felt that everything about the place was like a bad dream. The Trading Post was a series of dilapidated, cobbled-together sheds and docks. Made of scraps of lumber, rotting logs, dirty rope, and molding canvas, the Trading Post did not look promising—it smelled of long-dead fish and dreadful carvings of hideous faces were hung everywhere, leering down from walls and posts. "Trees were tortured to make those carvings," Helga muttered darkly to Ola, "those faces show the frozen screams of trees..." Wood Cows made their life among the trees and, over generations, had found ways to know what trees were thinking and feeling.

"Aiean, Misst Helgy," Ola replied, "the Cuoog'ers that run the post are a bad-bad lot!"

"Cougars run this trading post?" she asked, looking urgently at Ola.

"Aiean, Misst Helgy," Ola affirmed. "King Stuppy is a Cuoog'er that is only free because he was sentenced to the Drownlands instead of bein' hanged by the Grizzlies! The Grizzlies allow Stuppy to run his Tradin' Poost if he stays out of trouble—and remains in the Drownlands."

As Ola and Helga climbed the rickety wooden ladder from the dock up to the Trading Post, suddenly a cutlass was sticking in Helga's face! There was wild, screeching laughter; then many cutlasses, swords and pikes bristled in front of them. Soon, the short, extremely fat Cougar that had been holding his cutlass in Helga's face lowered it and looked at her with his fierce, red eyes.

"So, cow, get up here and welcome!" From then on, Ola and Helga were never alone. Being led into the Trading Post, they entered a dark gloom where it was hard to see anything distinctly, but it always seemed that there was some beast in the shadows with a cutlass at the ready.

Ola explained quietly that there was "nothin' to be wooried aboot."

Helga found this hard to believe but soon realized that Ola was right. Despite King Stuppy's terrifying look and the foul collection of riff-raff that constantly watched them, they were not harmed. Ola explained that the 'cutlass in the face' greeting was the customary welcome that King Stuppy gave to every unknown visitor. "Aiean, Misst Helgy," Ola said, "that's his warnin' that he'll be watchin' yor. Yor tooch his stuff, and yor be loosin' yorn fingers!"

In such a desolate, isolated spot, Helga would not have expected such traffic, but there were constantly arriving canoes and boats carrying all kinds of trading goods. "And a good bit of stoof that yor don't want to be askin' aboot!" Ola confided. Stuppy was "on to the shadowed work" Ola observed, with a knowing wink at Helga. "Just yorn not be askin' questions," Ola directed, "and we'll be livin' to go on."

Thus warned, Helga silently observed the frenzied buying and selling. Even before the boats and ferries reached dock, buyers were throwing pieces of their clothing on to the goods they wished to trade for or buy. She saw one large Otter throw his sweat-soaked shirt onto a basket of corn he wished to claim, as was the custom in the Drownlands. Creatures threw shoes and sandals on to piles of fish, a filthy hat onto a barrel of pear butter, and so on.

Most of the creatures at King Stuppy's got their meals from him. Bayou bread and steamed crayfish, bog-greens and catfish, fried marsh mushrooms and turnips. The food was reasonably good, Helga thought —but she avoided the Drownlands Grog that was the beverage of choice. She noticed some elderly Cougars sat playing checkers in a back room. As they played, they chewed a mixture of moss and leaves, and then spit it out into a vessel. They did this until a large vat was full of the mixture. This was mixed with water and marsh honey and left to ferment into the popular Drownlands Grog. Ola said that he had heard the blue-green drink tasted quite good, but it was against the Gateless Wolf diet to eat or drink prepared foods, so he had never tasted it.

Then there were the Cougars that were everywhere. Their rotten-smelling breath—even worse than the decaying fish—made the entire trading post reek with their presence. Yet, they were considered the "Royal Court of the King," for Stuppy considered himself King of his realm. When the Grizzly Bear judges had spared his life years before, Stuppy had taken this as permission to make a Kingdom for himself. And so he had done.

His 'Royal Court' was made up of the foulest-looking bunch of Cougars imaginable. Stuppy dressed them in the finest clothes, but these they never washed. Dried food, nose-drippings and other such slop and dirt covered the ruffled collars and fancy, embroidered coats

and leggings of the Cougar courtiers. Except when he ‘greeted’ unknown visitors with his cutlass, King Stuppy spent most of his time swinging lazily in his woven-grass hammock. With one eye carefully watching his domain, he ate marsh honey and bayou bread all day long.

Helga thought the odor of the marsh honey was unpleasant, but Ola told her that it had medicinal properties needed by King Stuppy. Marsh honey and bayou bread where the only things that King Stuppy could eat. His nerves had been damaged for life by poison darts Grizzly Bear trackers had shot from their blowguns to capture him. “The marsh honey keeps the King’s hand steady on the cutlass,” Ola remarked.

At first glance, as he lay in his hammock, Helga mused that King Stuppy looked like a very fat and sick old Cougar. “Only a fool would treat him like that, however,” Helga thought, “he would doom you without a moment wasted.”

And everyone who came and went from King Stuppy’s domain knew this basic fact. The honest traders, the dockworkers, the scullery folk, the thieves and bandits. No one challenged Stuppy Marit in the Realm of the King. No one, that is, except a certain cantankerous Wood Cow.

# No Jokes About Cougars

Burwell Oswego was snoozing hard—or at least trying to—as he jostled along in the running-wagon. Burwell, and several other passengers, rocked side to side with the motion, tired and stiff from the long ride. They would soon reach the last rest station, where Burwell knew most passengers would be getting off. It was rare for passengers to go on to the last stop, the station at the Drownlands Cutoff. Usually only cargo was carried on the last leg of the trip to the Cutoff.

But Burwell and his wife, Bwellina, were going on to the Cutoff. They were Bayou Dogs that had been on holiday, visiting relatives at the Rounds of Deep Springs, as they did every year. Burwell hated the busy trading season in the Drownlands—the folk got so obsessed with money and goods, he would almost break out in a rash to be near it. So, Burwell and Bwellina packed up and left for the Rounds. Now, they were on the way home. “Yep, by time’s we git back to our shanty,” Burwell said happily to Bwellina, “all them money-dazzled fools will be done with their binge, and things will be peaceable again...Yep! Yep! Yep!”

Bwellina, however, gently reminded Burwell that this year, the running-wagon schedule had changed. “Remember, Burwell, we had to come back a day earlier than usual. That means we’ll have to pass through the junction at King Stuppy’s Trading Post on the last day of the season. It will be an absolute frenzy at King Stuppy’s. So take your rash medicine, Burwell.” Bwellina gave her husband’s hand an understanding pat. Burwell, remembering that there was no escape from going into the thick of the trading crowds, muttered glumly, “I never understand it...they’ll be a spendin’ the money they just got faster than they got it. They know they have to go back out to the wilds, so they go to King Stuppy’s and sell their stuff, then they spend all the money they just got right there, and go home empty-handed. It’s the durn foolest thing I ever saw! King Stuppy likes it, though, I guess.”

From the Drownlands Cutoff, Burwell and Bwellina would catch the cargo pirogue to King Stuppy’s. There was usually room for them to throw their packs and bedrolls down on some cargo boxes and catch some shuteye on the ride to the Trading Post. The ride on the pirogue

was free if Burwell helped unload the cargo at the other end of the trip. That was the way Burwell like to travel—light and cheap, just like he and Bwellina lived. Once they reached King Stuppy's, one of their neighbors would be waiting for them and they'd catch another ride back to their shanty. Burwell would paddle the canoe on that leg while his neighbor got some rest. The system worked pretty good as Burwell considered it. It was the Bayou Dog style.

The Drownlands Cutoff was the most isolated of the running-wagon stations. Because of its remoteness, the station-master was rotated out once every two months. "Stay longer than two months at the Cutoff," Burwell had often been told, "and you risk going stark raving mad." Passengers and cargo came through only once a week and other than that, the station-master seldom saw any other visitors. So, when the wagons came, the night was filled with talk. News was exchanged, stories told, lies and gossip created, and contests held to see who could tell the biggest whopper. Burwell knew that on these nights at the Cutoff, you never could tell where truth left off and whopper began. But that did not bother him, because he always learned enough new tales to last him until the next trip through the Cutoff station.

That night, Burwell heard a story he knew he could tell over and over again for the enjoyment of his friends. "Yep, I seen it myself," Zeke, the station-master, was saying, "I seen Cow and Cougar travelin' together like they was the best friends in the world...never seen anything like it. Cows and Cougars together? Friendly like? It'd never happen, unless...unless they were drugged or bewitched or something! Yep, you mark my words," Zeke said with a knowing nod of this head, "them two's smuggling cactus sap or they found a gold mine or something like that. It ain't natural I say. Something fishy about a Cow and a Cougar being together like that." Then Zeke lowered his voice as if he were afraid someone might overhear him, "and you tell me why they came from the Bone Forest...you tell me that. No creature lives in the Bone Forest. There's no food, no water, and the sun will fry you in no time. Anyone says they're from the Bone Forest, you know they're liars. But they just looks me in the eye and says they're from the Bone Forest, like it was just a nice little place you went for vacation or something! It ain't natural, I tell you. The Bone Forest ain't nothing but dust and sun. Nothing can live there. I tell you, it gave me the willies!" Zeke stopped and leaned forward to Burwell, looking at him with a furrowed brow. "And to top it off," Zeke continued, "when I asks them where they was going, they says, 'to the Mountain that Moves But Stands Still'...Now don't that beat all? It ain't natural, I tell you."

Burwell filed this away in his memory for later use. His friends back home would love it—especially once he embellished it a bit more

and polished some of the details, maybe say the Cow made everyone laugh telling Cougar jokes, or something like that.

Poor Burwell. King Stuppy doesn't like jokes about Cougars. Somebody should warn Burwell. Oops. Too late...

# Bad to Worse for Breister

Breister's lungs felt as if they were about to burst. He had been holding his breath for what seemed like forever. But he dared not breathe. He was still many feet underwater, being tumbled and tossed with ferocious power by the raging torrent of the river.

He had barely caught a glimpse of the Cougar that was ambushing him before the attack began. Raising his arm, he had begun to swing his only weapon—the weighted fishing line—when the large, wild-faced Cougar flew into him. The force of the attack carried Breister backwards off of the ledge where he was camping.

SPLOOSH! Breister and the Cougar hit the water, tangled together with the fishing line that had wrapped around both of them. The Cougar, who had been swinging a machete at Breister as the attack began, now found his arms useless. The sheer brute force of the rapids slammed them into boulders in the river with such power that his arm was crushed, the machete falling free and gone forever in the surging torrent. The attack was forgotten as both Breister and the Cougar battled to save themselves. It was hopeless. With their arms immobilized by the tangle of fishing line, their bodies slammed again and again into rocks and boulders. They were at the mercy of the river. Breister could barely remain conscious to fight to hold his breath. He must hold out. To breathe now would fill his lungs with water and that would be the end. SLAM! Breister felt his body suddenly hit the rock canyon wall with tremendous force, enough to kill even a powerful Wood Cow like himself.

But, fortunately for him, Broken Eye's body had cushioned the blow, being sandwiched between Breister and the wall. The protecting shield had saved Breister from death...but the force of the impact crushed the Cougar. Breister, and his now lifeless attacker, caught on the rocks by tangled loops of fishing line. The sturdy cord had hung up on a piece of broken rock. Breister felt the sharp fishing line beginning to cut into his body as the force of the water tore at the mass in its way.

At last, the power of the river won out. The tangled line snapped and they surged free from one another back into the current.

Battered, gasping for breath, choking on swallowed water; Breister struggled to keep his head above the torrent as it carried him down

through the ferocious rapids. Then, the river became less tortured. Although the pace of the current did not slacken, the water became smoother and the boulders fewer. Breister could now keep his head above water and gather some fresh air in his lungs. But, as he was taking a breath, he saw a Skull Buzzard diving towards him. Not having time to duck, Breister braced for the impact—but it never came. The Skull Buzzard had gone for the body of Broken Eye, preferring the ease of an already dead prey. Other Skull Buzzards joined the first, and they lifted the body out of the current and carried it to the riverside where they feasted on the carcass.

Breister turned his head away. His eyes fell on a massive whirlpool that inexorably pulled him into its yawning maw...

# The Mountain Moves But Stands Still

Burwell Oswego was a mild-mannered, sober Bayou Dog whose life of hard work, homespun fun and quiet living was a source of deep contentment for him. He loved to sit on the porch of his shanty, deep in the bayous, listening to the humming of the locusts and 'tendin' his home,' as he put it. He avoided the 'gross pleasures' of the trading season, which was why he normally planned his travel to avoid it.

The last day of trading season was especially wild. Most Drownlands creatures had no use for money at home, so they spent it before they left. Crayfish cakes flew off the griddle and Drownlands Grog flowed like water. Burwell steadfastly avoided Drownlands Grog, because of its tendency to make the rough and foolish even worse. But he did drink considerable amounts of Bog Fizz. The sweet drink, named for its tendency to furiously fizz with bubbles, was a favorite with small beasts—and with Burwell.

Although Bog Fizz was a soft drink, it had a strange affect on Burwell. Its natural, fizzing bubbliness tickled Burwell's nose so much, and made him hiccough so much, that he lost control of himself. "Hoo, hoo, hoo, ha, ha, ha...Wooooeee...Hic! Hic! Hicccc-Hooo-Yip!...Wooooeee that tickles!...Hoo, hoo, hoo, Hic-Hic-Hicccc-Hooooo-Yip!" That was Burwell when he drank Bog Fizz. Especially if he was in a happy mood, and most especially if he was telling stories, gossip, or jokes that he thought were hilarious—Burwell completely lost control. He became totally silly...out of his mind...momentarily insane with glee. No one could talk to him. He just went, "Hoo, hoo, hoo, Hic-Hic-Hic, WOOOEEEE!" Every once in a while, he would try to blubber some part of a joke, or repeat some snatch of a funny tale, or make up some wild new piece of gossip...and then off he'd go into gales of laughter.

Burwell had long ago promised Bwellina that he would not drink Bog Fizz when they were at home or anywhere in 'polite company.' So, when they arrived at King Stuppy's Trading Post, and Burwell said he was tired and thirsty, Bwellina knew what was coming. Throwing their bags up on the dock, Burwell gave a Dock Squirrel a coin and told him to "carry the bags over to Stram Noggbet's barge and tell him we'll be there as soon as I wet my whistle with some Bog Fizz." Bwellina calmly picked up her straw knitting bag, fixed her flowered

hat firmly in place, and set off to find a quiet place to knit.

Burwell walked up to the Bog Fizz vendor's cart, standing tall among the crowd of small beasts gathered there. "A pint of Bog Fizz," Burwell said to the vendor.

Bwellina, meanwhile, moved down the dock to where an elderly Opossum was selling tea and donuts. Bwellina ordered a cup of sizzle-tea and a pecan-crusted donut. "One sizzler and p-wheel comin' right up, dearie," the old Opossum smiled. She worked a bellows on her cart to fan a small fire, heating a bed of smooth round stones to red-hot. Deftly picking out one from the fire with tongs, she placed it into a thick crockery mug and sprinkled it with a mixture of herbs and dried flower petals. The herbs and petals began to toast instantly, giving off a pleasant, warm fragrance. As soon as the fragrance began to waft, the Opossum poured boiling water over the stone. Even boiling water was cooler than that super-heated stone and an explosion of steam poured out of the mug. Sizzling steam threw clouds of strong fragrance into the air. The beverage never failed to have a calming effect on Bwellina.

She settled down with her steaming mug, nibbled a piece of her donut, and put a few stitches on the new sweater she was knitting. Sighing happily into her mug of tea, Bwellina closed her eyes, letting the fragrant steam fill her nostrils. How calming it was. She was vaguely aware that Burwell was 'hitting his stride' nearby, but she was determined to ignore it until...

Above all the noise and hubbub, she could clearly hear Burwell laughing and hiccoughing. He was wheezing with delight. She could pick out snatches of what he was saying: "Hooo, Hooo, Hooo, Ha, Ha, Hooo...Hic-Hic-Hic-HooooYip!...Yessiree...Hooo, Hooo...and the minstrel band had a Cougar lady playing an accordion and harmonica and...Hooo, Hooo, Hooo...Oh, I can't stand it...Ha, Ha, Hic-Hic-Hic-HoooYip...and the Cougar was all peaceable and kind and she was with a Wood Cow...Hooo, Hooo...Ain't seen one of those 'round here before...Hoo, hooo, hoo, Hic-Hic-Hic...Hoo, Hooo, Hooo...And what beats all, is they said they were going to the Mountain that Moves But Stands Still...Hoo, Hoo, Hoo, Hic-Hic-Hic-HoooYip...who ever heard such stuff!"

King Stuppy, who had been dozing lazily in his hammock, leaped up and stormed over to where Burwell was wheezing with delight, letting Bog Fizz bubbles break on his nose, happily oblivious to the furious king now standing beside him.

"What did you say about the Cougar?" King Stuppy demanded.

Burwell, still not conscious of his danger, and thinking that his wild story was making the crowd happy, replied by making the story even wilder: "Hooo, Ha, Ha...I said she was a Cougar dancer wearing a tutu,

and playing a banjo, harmonica and accordion all at the same time...Hoo-Hoo-Hoo, Hic-Hic-Hic...HooWEEE!"

King Stuppy was not amused. "Stupid Dog," he said, slicing a button off of Burwell's coat with his cutlass. "You insult the Cougars, for which I condemn you," he continued. "But before I decide how to deal with you, I give you the chance to live." Lowering the point of his cutlass away from Burwell's belly, where it had been poking, King Stuppy pulled Burwell close and whispered harshly in his ear: "What did you say about the Mountain that Moves But Stands Still? Where is it? Tell me how to find it and you will live!"

# “Listen to the Place Inside You”

Helga walked from one end of the Trading Post to the other, again and again, talking to creature after creature, always asking the same question: “Have you seen any Wood Cows?” She knew from Ola that Wood Cows were almost never seen in the Drownlands. The Forever End had cut off their homelands for centuries, and only those of the ancient stock lived beyond the Forever End. If any creature had seen a strange Wood Cow, it could be a clue to the fate of her father. Again and again she asked the question, looking earnestly into the faces of each creature, searching for a hint that they knew something that would help her find her father. Again and again, the answer was the same. No one had seen a Wood Cow.

Then, as she passed the Bog Fizz vendor, lost in her thoughts, she heard the phrase, “Wood Cow.” It was like a splash of cold water in the face, cutting through the accumulating dust of despair. Helga was instantly alert and electrified. Her mind replayed what it had heard:

“Oh, I can’t stand it...Ha, Ha, Hic-Hic-Hic-HoooYip... HoooWHEE...and the Cougar was a talking like a WooSheep, all peaceable and kind and she was with a Wood Cow...Hooo, Hooo, Hooo...Ain’t seen one of those ’round here before...Hoo, Hooo, Hoo, Hic-Hic-Hic...”

Scanning the crowd around the Bog Fizz cart, Helga saw King Stuppy holding a Bayou Dog by the coat, apparently angry and threatening the unfortunate creature. King Stuppy had the poor Dog’s shirt and suspenders in his powerful grip, lifting him up on his tiptoes. She could not hear what the Cougar was snarling in the Dog’s ear, but every instinct of pity and justice urged her to his assistance. Helga charged toward the place where King Stuppy held Burwell in his grip. She never reached them. Tough Cougar thugs—King Stuppy’s bodyguards—instantly surrounded her, cutlasses drawn, fingers sheathed in ugly, sharply-spiked brass knuckle rings. Helga stopped. Some other tactic would be needed.

“You claim not to know about the Mountain that Moves But Stands Still,” King Stuppy said quietly in Burwell’s ear. “So be it. I believe you, Dog. But perhaps you only forget. King Stuppy is a generous and fair ruler. He will give you a chance to remember anything you might have forgotten. You insulted the Cougars, which is punished by death.

But if you soon remember anything you have forgotten about the Mountain that Moves But Stands Still, you will be spared. I sentence you to 'Ride the Log.' You will not die instantly, so you will have time to remember. If you remember, I will free you. If you do not, you die. Guards! Bind him to the log!"

King Stuppy was furious. Here was yet another fool telling of the Mountain that Moves But Stands Still, but who, when confronted with the majesty of King Stuppy's questioning, turned into a mere blubbering idiot. He was nearly crazy with his desire to find this mysterious Mountain. Each year he sent out explorers to search for the Mountain that Moves But Stands Still, but it had never been found.

The mythical mountain was said to have castles of light with golden walls, and limitless sparkling gems. It was said to be so dazzling that those who beheld it could not speak of it. But King Stuppy knew better. He knew that those who had seen this marvelous place were greedy for its fabulous riches and did not want others to share in the wealth. So King Stuppy would find it himself. And when he found it, he would take all the riches.

The problem was, he could not find it. Each year a traveler would drop a hint, or tell a story, that seemed to give a lead to the location of the Mountain. Each year, he sent out explorers in a different direction. The searchers never returned. Sometimes, a straggler would stumble back to King Stuppy, arriving half-starved and in rags, having lost his mind wandering in the wilds for months with little food or water. The straggler, if he could speak coherently about his experiences, always reported the same thing: the King's explorers had perished, not by attack from enemies, but by becoming so completely lost, in such remote wilds, that they simply starved or died of thirst.

King Stuppy was not deterred by these unpromising results. None of his subjects knew the fate of his exploring parties. So far as anyone in the Drownlands knew, King Stuppy was sending criminals into exile. For anyone in King Stuppy's realm that transgressed against his rule, there were only two possible punishments: either become one of the King's adventurers, or Ride the Log. Except for those poor creatures specifically sentenced to Ride the Log, most who angered King Stuppy chose to go exploring. The king promised them freedom and a share in the riches if they found the Mountain that Moves But Stands Still and brought proof back to him.

That King Stuppy had no intention to honor his promises did not matter. He was a patient Cougar. He would keep sending out explorers. If they did not return, it did not matter—it disposed of troublemakers. If, however, they did return one day with proof of the location of the Mountain...Well, then he would have a special reward for those brave beasts who had brought him his fondest wish. They

would Ride the Log. Only King Stuppy would know that secret.

Helga surveyed the menacing ring of King Stuppy's thugs. It did not look good for Burwell. In her injured condition, she could not use her Yeow-Yeow skills. Physically, she could not fight her way through King Stuppy's guards. Yet she could not bear the thought of a poor, innocent Bayou Dog being made to Ride the Log. She must do something.

Unhappy creatures condemned to Ride the Log were tied to logs and set adrift in the Drownlands. Floating with the currents and unable to help or protect themselves, the poor condemned creatures died slowly, or sometimes were quickly picked apart by hungry insects and fish. It was not a pretty way to die. Piteous pleas for mercy and help were said to echo through the Drownlands when such a punishment occurred. Fear of riding King Stuppy's logs made few creatures wish to oppose him.

Helga could not allow it to happen. The punishment was brutal and against all justice. The poor Bayou Dog had done nothing terrible as far as Helga could see. And he might know something that would help her find her father. She must save him. The ring of cutlasses surrounding her was threatening, but not advancing. The guards wanted only to stop Helga from interfering with the King, not capture her. The ways of the Wood Cows were unknown in the Drownlands. They were so rare that everything about Helga was seen as interesting and exotic. She could use this curiosity about Wood Cow ways to her advantage.

Lifting up the flicker-pole she used as a walking stick, Helga began to work it with skillful, fluid movements. As the unusual staff began to produce it's melodic humming, her guards, at first, looked on in amusement and interest. They had never seen such a sight! Helga's beautifully fluid movements as she furiously worked the pole, were astonishing. She observed the amazed, unsuspecting stares of her guards with mingled amusement and hope.

Gradually at first, then in torrents of wingbeats, the sky filled with every type of bird residing in the Drownlands! Large and small, noisy Jays and reserved Robins, rough-talking Hawks and genteel Eagles—all came in to find roosts at the Trading Post. Dozen after dozen they dropped from the sky, covering every available inch of roosting space—on buildings, fences, hats, heads, shoulders, arms—anywhere they could lock their feet.

As the birds began to rain in from the sky, panic seized the crowd and chaos ensued. Helga, well aware of what was to happen, took advantage of the turmoil and panic to grab Burwell and Bwellina, who had also tried to come to Burwell's aid, and led them to safety. Ola jumped in his canoe and helped the others board. The small canoe

rode very low in the water under the heavy load of passengers, but Ola pointed out, laughing, that “overloaded boats is the Drownlands tradition!”

Ola shoved off hurriedly, and he and Burwell paddled furiously away from King Stuppy’s Trading Post. All were grateful to be leaving. Burwell wheezed with joy of a different sort.

As they paddled away into the backways of the Drownlands, Helga asked Burwell many questions. “Have you actually seen a Wood Cow? Where? When? What did he look like? Did you talk with him?” The questions burst from Helga like a torrent. Unfortunately, she learned that most of what Burwell had said were his fibbing embellishments of a story he had heard from the station-master at the Drownlands Cutoff.

Helga was disappointed, but not discouraged. Consulting with Ola and her new friends, she decided that she must go to the Cutoff station. She would find out if a Wood Cow had actually been there. As she shared this decision, she looked at the faces of her friends. Gazing at each, one by one, she asked the question without speaking it: Did they wish to go with her?

Ola was the first to speak: “Misst Helgy, tha’is friend of yorn is forever yorn friend and loyalist. But tha’is friend of yorn bein’ a Gateless Wolf, and he can’t but help bein’ a wanderer. Just as I found you in need of a friend, other travelers bein’ in need. I must remain in the wilds. But the enigma is that if we part, we will surely be close forever.”

Burwell and Bwellina, on the other hand, urgently pleaded to go with Helga. The thought of being left in the Drownlands without either Helga or Ola caused Burwell to burst into pathetic cries. “Oh, woe or mercy, woe or mercy, that’s my choices! If I stay in the Drownlands, King Stuppy will hunt me, and he’ll hunt me until he brings me to woe! Helga the Merciful is my only hope! Oh, please, Helga, have mercy on a poor, poor Bayou Dog! I don’t want to Ride the Log! Yep! Yep! Yep!”

While not ignoring the real danger Burwell would be in if he stayed in the Drownlands, Helga burst out laughing at his dramatic pleading. “Oh, Burwell, you know I couldn’t leave you and Bwellina here...I don’t have a clue how to get to the Drownlands Cutoff. You know the way, I presume?” Helga furrowed her eyebrows, giving Burwell a very solemn look. “Without your help I would be a lost creature that Ola would have to come rescue!” Helga laughed.

“Well, yes, Helga, I have been to the Drownlands Cutoff station...Oh, about three dozen times. Bwellina and I have been going that route every year for more than thirty years.”

Ola was not joining in the joking talk. He appeared to be in deep

reflection. Helga knew it was best to leave him alone when he was in such a mood. She gave Burwell a quieting look, and they paddled on silently, going in no particular direction, but staying to the concealed, lost bayous away from the main routes. Ola used a paddle as a rudder, moving it slightly from time to time as if with his swaying, meditative mood. Where were they going? Helga, Burwell and Bwellina had no idea. Helga guessed that Ola was simply doing his best to keep them away from King Stuppy's search parties.

At last, they floated into a lake, well protected by trees and thick reeds on all sides. Once on the lake, Ola lay his rudder paddle down, and let the canoe drift aimlessly. Helga and Burwell waited to hear his plans. Instead, he began playing his flute. Helga, although puzzled, was grateful for the break in the solemn mood.

The Wolf played for quite some time as the canoe drifted gradually toward the far shore of the lake. As night began to fall, the Locusts began their evening chirruping, seeming almost to harmonize with Ola's music. Stars came out as the sky darkened—billions and billions of stars, dazzling across the night sky.

Finally, as the canoe bumped against the shoreline of the lake, Ola put away his instrument. He pointed to a large tree with wide spreading branches slightly down the shore. "We'll be stoppin' there tonight," he said. "There's a traveler's lean-to on the back side." Taking up their paddles once more, they pushed down to the tree Ola had indicated.

"We can camp here in safety," Ola announced. "I've been asking the Locusts to watch out for King Stuppy's boats. I learned to play my flute by listenin' to the Locusts and following their tune. I learned to be talkin' with them. They'll be lettin' us know if they see anything."

Guiding the canoe to the bank, Helga and Burwell were grateful to stretch their cramped muscles. As soon as the canoe touched the bank, Ola leaped up and grabbed a low-hanging branch of the tree. Pulling himself up on the branch, he called to the others, "Don't step out on the bank, friends, it bein' quicksand. I'll droop yor down a rope and pull yorn up. Then we'll walk along the branch and climb down on the back side, where the ground bein' firm."

A vine rope was lowered and Bwellina tied it around her waist. Then hanging on tight, Ola hauled her up in the tree. Burwell and Helga followed. Ola showed them the way to follow a well-worn path across some low branches. He helped Helga, still a bit unsteady on her injured legs, to navigate the route safely. The branch reached a solid hillock at the rear of the tree that rose above the lower, wet ground. The creatures did not even have to jump to step off the branch where it reached the hillock. A rough shelter was built there.

"Tha'is will be 'Welcome to Ola's Retreat,'" Ola smiled. "Tha'is will

do for tonight. We'll eat catfish, soon as I catch some. Tomorrow, I'll show yor the way toward the Bone Forest, and then I'll be leavin' yor."

"The Bone Forest!" Helga exclaimed. "But we need to go to the station at Drownlands Cutoff, Ola," she continued urgently. "There's a chance the station-master may know something about Papa...I've got to do it...I miss him terribly..." Helga felt confused and somewhat angry with Ola. Why didn't he understand? Burwell also protested.

"Friends, friends," Ola smiled. "If yor go to the Drownlands Cutoff, yor will all be Riding the Log. King Stuppy will be watching that route with his spies. There's not a chance you could get there safely. It's likely that he might even send some Cougar raiders to ransack the station. Yor cannot go to the Drownlands Cutoff."

"OK, Ola," Helga replied. "I see your point, but why go to the Bone Forest? How can that possibly help?"

"Aiean, Misst Helgy," Ola said, "yorn not be understandin' this soon. I don't even understand it myself yet. Boot, from what we know, the Bone Forest may hold some meanin' for yorn search, and it may help yor elude any pursuers King Stuppy sends after yor."

"Ola! Are you sure? I thought no one could live in the Bone Forest?" Helga was deeply puzzled, and with a hint of impatience, she added, "From all we have heard, the Bone Forest is a horrible wasteland, with no food, no water, and nothing but burning sun and dust! I lost Papa on a surging river, which, if anything, may come out somewhere around the Drownlands, but certainly not in a desert." She grimaced in dismay. "I think you're nuts to even suggest such a ridiculous idea."

"Aiean, Misst Helgy," Ola nodded, "I ain't been there myself—and don't know much aboot it. Boot, it bein' better than meetin' up with King Stuppy for sure, and what other leads do yorn have? Sometimes the place we're lookin' for isn't a place." At this curious statement, Helga gazed into Ola's face searching for his meaning. She saw only the usual happiness of her friend. If there was any other intent in his speech, it was only to give her an enigma to consider.

Helga's head was spinning. The Bone Forest! A dry, desert wasteland, rumored to be filled with the bones of creatures that had died there. A horrible place to be avoided at all costs. Now Ola thought she should go there. As they made camp for the night, Helga had much to think about...

Ola worked quickly, but without haste, as was normal for him. Pulling out a coil of fishing line he carried in his pack, he soon pulled several catfish from the lake. Cleaning them, he pressed them with wild blackberry juice, wrapped them in wild onions and grass, and roasted them between two Y-shaped sticks over a small fire Helga had

made. Soon, they had a modest but very pleasing meal.

Helga loved fish and ate greedily. Then, after eating she sat for a long time, thinking. The deep darkness of the Drownlands wilderness made the sky seem especially brilliant with stars. Billions of points of light glistened overhead. Each one seemed more dazzling than the rest. Which one was brightest? One surely must be brighter than the others. Wasn't that the way the world was? She wondered.

"Countin' the stars, Misst Helgy?" Ola asked, sitting down beside her.

"No, just wondering if there's one that is the most brilliant of all. Pretty silly question, eh?" Helga replied, grinning sheepishly.

"Niean, Misst Helgy," her friend responded, "don't yor worry aboot that. If there bein' not the brightest, there bein' not the dimmest. We'd all bein' lost without seekin' the brighter stars to follow. Niean, there's always bein' a star that's the brighter. Yor just got to find it."

"Ola, I know what you're saying. I know that me deciding what to do now, which way to go, is like trying to find the brightest star in a sky full of brilliant stars. But how will I find it, Ola?" Helga asked. "There are so many stars. How is it possible? I sit here first thinking one thing, then thinking another. I feel so confused."

"Well, Misst Helgy, there bein' a star that's sayin' right to yor, I'm the brightest. Listen to that place inside yor that nobody can see. The brightest star is there, where no one can see it." Ola gave Helga another of his gentle grins as he watched her puzzle over yet another enigma.

"G'night, Misst Helgy," Ola said as he turned to retire, "don't let the enigmas keep you up."

Helga, feeling full and safe, dozed off, still pondering her questions.

# Toward the Bone Forest

"Pssst! Helga, are you asleep?" Burwell was kneeling beside her, as Helga groggily opened her eyes. "I'm sorry to be bothering you," Burwell apologized, "but I can't stop thinking about what Ola said. I wanted to talk to you about it."

"What do you want to say, Burwell? I'm listening," Helga replied. Helga could see that her friend was troubled.

"I don't know what to think, Helga. It looks like craziness to head off to the Bone Forest. We'll die for sure. We can't go to the Drownlands Cutoff. We'll die for sure. We can't stay in the Drownlands. We'll die for sure. I don't like our choices..." He grew silent.

Helga said nothing. She shared Burwell's concerns, but she also trusted Ola's judgment. He knew the wilds better than anyone—but she also respected Burwell's opinions. Although he was, in some ways, a silly and undisciplined fellow, Helga could see that underneath his silliness, he had a sincere kindness toward all. She also knew that a Bayou Dog did not survive in the Drownlands without a quick wit, courage and perseverance. Burwell was more than many might think. And Bwellina was like a rock, unwavering, unafraid, and unflappable. Her soft snoring was a perfect indication of how worry affected her.

"What should we do, Burwell?" Helga asked.

"I think we should try for the Cutoff station," Burwell replied. "We probably have at least a little head start on King Stuppy's thugs. We have a chance if we go that way. Going to the Bone Forest is suicide. You have as good a chance finding a trace of Breister at the Cutoff as in the Bone Forest—and perhaps we might have a chance to live. The Cutoff is the gateway into the Rounds of Deep Springs. If we can make it there we will be safe. You will have a life there. But in the Bone Forest, what will you have? Yep! Yep! Yep!"

Helga was silent for a time. Burwell had some excellent points. Yet her answer was not delayed long, and it was firm.

"Burwell, I appreciate your good-spirited desire to help me. I know you worry about me. I treasure that—and I love the thought of going to the Rounds again. I grew up there. I would truly love it there. But I want a chance to regain my Papa. Somehow, I think Ola is right. The place I am seeking is not a place. My heart tells me that both my

affection for the Rounds and my hate for the Bone Forest may blind me to the true path." Burwell understood her meaning.

"So, we are going to the Bone Forest." Burwell observed. It was not a question, but a statement of conviction.

Helga looked at her friend. "I am going to the Bone Forest," she replied. "You and Bwellina should also follow your hearts. Go to the Cutoff and escape into the Rounds if you can."

"No, we go to the Bone Forest with you," Bwellina declared, coming up to join the talk. "After what happened at King Stuppy's Trading Post, we have no life here in the Drownlands any more. And after meeting you, we who have never before had a family, now have one. If you will have us, we are united in our quest to find Breister. What is a Bone Forest among family?" Bwellina finished, looking at her comrades with mock solemnity.

"Well, other than the Bone Forest being a death sentence, it surely is a wonderful thing to share!" Burwell observed dryly. Helga looked at Burwell, and chuckled. "My plan is to share everything with you except the death sentence," Helga replied with a grim smile. "And I think, to see Ola's face, we are about to depart."

The first pink streaks of dawn were beginning to light the sky as Ola spoke. "Pick up yorn things quickly," he whispered. "We've got to be movin'—the Locusts have stopped singin'. That's the signal we've got visitors from King Stuppy! We're warned in time to get away, but we can't dally. I'll load into the canoe and head out of here. I'll lead the King's men on a merry old chase, then I'll slip away and they'll never find me. Yor lay low, and then hike to the Bone Forest, safe and sound!"

"You're taking the canoe and leaving us here, Ola?" Helga said incredulously. "You want us to walk out of the Drownlands? This place is nothing but water and quicksand!"

Ola smiled. "Yorn follow this sand-ridge line. It'll lead yor all the way to the Bone Forest. Don't leave the ridgeline, it'll bein' quicksand on all the sides—that'll be yorn protection. The King will be thinkin' yor will be paddlin' out of the Drownlands," Ola concluded, "but yorn be walkin' right through the swamps. He's not be thinkin' that way!"

Helga looked at Ola in amazement. "Ola, you're a genius!" Helga enthused.

"Niean, Misst Helgy," Ola replied grinning. "It bein' the power of the Enigma!"

Giving a quick hug all the way around, Ola was soon in the canoe, paddling off into the dawn. Soon the lovely notes of a flute could be heard. As if led by a magical piper, several massive canoes filled with rough-looking Cougars, Boars, and Weasels, glided past Ola's hidden retreat, where Burwell, Bwellina, and Helga waited. The evil-looking

pursuers wore heavy, gold-braided uniforms and were armed with cutlasses and pikes. They also carried the trappings of the King's royal court: elaborate banners and huge ensigns of solid gold.

As soon as King Stuppy's canoes had passed, and they felt certain they were far gone, the friends shouldered their packs and began following the sandy ridgeline, heading toward the Bone Forest.

# In the Path of the Gateless Wolf

Ola paddled skillfully through some of the most tangled parts of the Drownlands swamps. Weaving his canoe in and out among the enormous trees, following an endless maze of bayous, Ola confused his pursuers and soon felt certain that King Stuppy's thugs were hopelessly lost somewhere to his rear. Despite feeling safe, Ola paddled on and on, at last heading into the Everlost region of the Drownlands—a trackless area of thick reed forests. Thin, resiliant reeds towered eight to twelve feet above the surface of the water. Flexible and light, the grasslike reeds moved in the breeze like waves. Ola loved the Everlost because of the great enigma it represented. "Now, if yorn be'in Ever Lost, the creature must o'known he's not lost at least once, or he wouldn't know he be'in lost!"

But Ola also knew the Everlost was a dangerous place. With no solid ground or trees to be found, a creature had to stay in a boat. But in the boat, nothing could be seen except gently waving reeds on all sides. In places, the reeds were so tall and dense that they obscured most of the sky, leaving the traveler to 'burrow' through the reeds in a canoe. Ola freely went in and out of the Everlost, relying on the power of Enigma: "If yor be'in in the Everlost, follow the way of those that not be'in lost! Follow those on the way to somewhere!"

Ola listened and observed the signs of flocks of birds overhead. The patterns of flight that he could glimpse through the reeds and the sound of the bird calls gave him a direction to follow. "The birds know where they be go'in," Ola thought, "so I can go the same place they be go'in." By such a method Ola always successfully traversed the Everlost, although he never knew exactly where he would come out! But, being a Gateless Wolf, Ola typically did not care where he ended up. It was an adventure to explore new places. Living in his canoe for as long as it took to leave the Everlost behind, Ola did not mind the slowness of this progress through the reeds. There were plenty of fish and fresh water to sustain him until he found his way.

When he at last did emerge from the Everlost, he was in unfamiliar terrain. He saw rolling grassy hills before him, mottled here and there with small fields of corn and vegetables. Pulling his canoe up on dry land for the first time in several days, Ola slowly worked the cramps of the long confinement in his canoe out of his legs, arms, and back.

Spying a tall oak tree nearby, he took his flute pouch and headed off to hang by his feet and play his flute for a while. It was that time of the day when the sun is just beginning to set. Ola planned to hang and play his flute until just before dark and then make a simple camp for the night.

He had just climbed the tree and was stepping out on a branch to get settled into position, when he saw something off in the distance that startled him. A large male Wood Cow was working in a corn field! Could it be Breister? Ola was so overjoyed at the possibility that he dropped from the tree clumsily and ran off to investigate.

As he approached the muscular creature busily hoeing weeds, he could see that he was definitely dressed in a manner and style similar to Helga. Clearly, he was of the same clan. Grinning widely, Ola called out, "Yor be'in Breister? Yor know'in a Wood Cow named Helgy?"

Dropping his hoe, the beast ran to meet Ola. "Breister? Helga? Do you know such creatures, friend? Have you seen them?"

Disappointed that the Wood Cow obviously was not Helga's lost father, Ola still retained his happy smile. At least the stranger seemed to know who Breister and Helga were.

"Who yor be'in?" Ola asked. "Yor be'in a friend of Breister and Helgy?"

"Aye, my friend," his new acquaintance answered. "My name is Emil. If you are talking about Helga of the Hedgelands, then that is a Wood Cow I know. She is my sister."

"Breister's son!" Another member of Helga's family! Perhaps he might know how to locate Breister.

Unfortunately, however, Emil had no news about Breister. In fact, Ola knew more about Breister and Helga than Emil did. Emil had not heard the news of the expulsion of the Wood Cows. After he had escaped from *Maev Astuté,* he had been completely unable to steer the balloon and traveled far beyond the Hedgelands.

"I tried desperately to pilot the balloon," Emil explained, "but I had no time to learn. When I jumped on the bicycle in the High One's Throne Room, I had no idea it was a launch vehicle! The launch completely surprised me, and with my Coyote friend draped over my shoulders, I could not handle the controls. I attempted to direct the balloon, but failed."

Emil shook his head in disbelief as the memory of the balloon launch came back. "The wind was ferocious. It threw the balloon wildly this way and that. All I could do was keep us from being tossed overboard! Although I felt nauseous, I did manage to accidentally flip a lever that popped open an enclosure to form a passenger basket around the bicycle. With that small shelter available, we both collapsed in the bottom of the basket and rode the winds. It was very

cold. The basket enclosure was fairly well closed at the top, but at the bottom there were so many gears, wheels, and other machinery that it was quite open. I had no idea where we were carried. Low-hanging clouds made it impossible to see the ground, and we sailed far past the limits of the Forever End. The balloon traveled on far into the night, in what direction I could not guess."

"Yor came down near's about, I take it?" Ola inquired.

"Aye, the balloon landed not far from here," Emil replied. "I tell you, Ola, that balloon just suddenly dropped like a rock! A seam split open. We were fortunate that the split was relatively small. We dropped rapidly, but the balloon lost gas slowly enough that, although we crashed hard, we were not badly hurt."

"Yorn Coyote friend is here?" Ola asked.

"Aye," Emil answered. "His name is PorNart-1604. He's with me at Mar-Marie and Ord's house." Noting Ola's quizzical look, Emil continued. "Mar-Marie and Ord are Norder Wolves who live with their four daughters and three sons in a house just on the other side of this cornfield.

"Norder Wolves!" Ola exclaimed. "Here?"

Emil looked at Ola with a pitying look. "And just exactly where do you think 'Here' might be?"

Ola did not reply. He realized that he could not be sure where he was, but he was very surprised to find Norder Wolves. His wide wanderings in the wilderness gave him a broad understanding of where the homelands of different folk lay, and what patterns of movement different adventurers, traders, and rogues tended to follow. Norder Wolves near the Everlost? He had never heard that. He was puzzled. Then he realized the problem. "Enigma!" he breathed softly to himself. "The more a creature be'in sure he knows stoof, the more likely it be'in that he don't know it all." Drawing on the power of Enigma, Ola regained his composure. He was ready to meet the Norder Wolves.

"Come on, Ola," Emil invited, "I'll introduce you to Mar-Marie and Ord." Picking up his hoe, Emil motioned for Ola to follow. As they walked around the cornfield, Emil related more of his story.

"See that low hill right over there? That's where the balloon crashed. When we came down, it wasn't easy for us. PorNart-1604 was in terrible shape—frostbite, maybe some broken bones, shallow breathing. I was very worried. But from the hillside, I could see the faint light of the farmhouse and felt hope. Although very weak and exhausted, I picked up PorNart-1604 and carried him to the farmhouse. When we reached it, I managed to knock once. When Ord opened the door, I toppled over into the house. Mar-Marie nursed me and the Coyote back to health."

Ola was fascinated by the story. His mind raced. Norder Wolves were distant ancestors of Ola's folk. So, there was some special interest in his anticipation of meeting Mar-Marie and Ord.

As they approached the farmhouse, Ola could see a heavy set female Wolf in a plaid apron sweeping the dirt path in front of the house.

"Hullo! Mar, we've got a visitor! Call Ord! It's a friend of my sister!"

Mar-Marie stopped her sweeping and looked curiously at Ola. She, too, was apparently surprised to meet another Wolf. She gave a warm and welcoming smile.

The beautiful weather, warm and mild, and the bright red and green plaid Mar-Marie wore made the welcome seem especially lovely to Ola.

"Nar, sweets! Just hold there a moment," Mar-Marie greeted them. "The dust is deep in the path. It's not fitting as a welcome. Hold just there a moment, while I finish my sweeping." The female Wolf swept the dirt path furiously, setting up great clouds of dust, stripping off every speck of dust that could be removed.

When she stopped sweeping at last, she smiled again at her visitors. "So sorry, sweets, but you caught me in my evening sun-making. I dare not delay it," she said, as if they would certainly understand. "Nar, sweets, forgive me a bit more, if you would. Stay there while I get Ord and bring you some water to drink." As friendly as the Wolf's welcome had been, she still made it clear they were not to approach the house yet.

Ola looked to Emil questioningly. Emil, understanding Ola's bewilderment, grinned at him. "Aye, it seems odd, does it not?" he remarked. "But there's a beautiful reason that we are asked to respect."

Soon, Mar-Marie returned with a crockery pitcher of water and cups. She offered some to Ola and Emil. "If you'll be so kind as to sit over there while you drink your water, I'll finish up my sun-making in a stitch. Ord is down in the root cellar doing some work. Now, if you'll just excuse me a bit, I'll finish up and we can welcome you proper."

Carrying the pitcher and cups over to a bench Mar-Marie had indicated, Ola and Emil sat down to wait. Ola noticed that the Wolf was now sprinkling the area she had swept with water, making it damp but not muddy. Then she came back with her broom and swept the sprinkled area furiously. Ola had never seen such a thing.

"It's a kind of ritual that Mar does every day just at sunset," Emil explained. "She calls it sun-making. She believes that if she does not leave the path in front of her house spotless and easy to travel in the

dark each day, that the sun will not be able to find its way to her door...Mar says that the new day will not come if her path is not clean and easy to walk in the dark."

Ola gave Emil a broad smile. He liked Mar already! She understood the power of Enigma! "Emil, Mar be'in a wise creature. Yor find'in the brightest light only by clean'in the places that can't be cleaned! Yor mak'in a path in the dark for the brightest light!" Emil, still not fully acquainted with Ola, gave his new friend an appreciative, but uncertain look.

When Mar-Marie had finished sweeping, the path in front of her house was extremely smooth; the dirt surface hard-packed and clean. Without a doubt, Ola could see that the stretch of path going past Mar-Marie's house clearly stood out from the rest of the path. He found it hard to imagine the sun walking along in the dark and needing a special surface to find its way, but he respected the belief of his host. If nothing else, her efforts did make the path beautiful and easy to walk. And who really knew what made the sun rise? He certainly didn't. Maybe she was right!

"So, come on into our house, sweets," Mar-Marie invited. "You've found a lost traveler, I see, Emil?" she said, looking at Ola.

Walking into the house, Ola saw a male Wolf, dressed in rough dark clothes; like legends Ola had once heard of voyagers on the distant seas. The Wolf had long ashes-gray hair. Ola judged that he was perhaps forty years old, similar to what he guessed Mar's age to be. The Wolf was heavy set, like his wife. Although his rough coat bulged with a bit of a paunch, he was nevertheless strongly muscular, with thick arms, broad shoulders, and clear eyes circled by wizened rings.

"Ord," Mar-Marie said to the Wolf as he ascended the last stair or two out of what was apparently a cellar under the house, "you must leave your work and welcome a new friend."

The Wolf walked quickly over to Ola, holding out both his paws to him. "Greetings, take peace in our humble house," he said, grasping Ola's paw in both of his own in a warm pawclasp. "What business brings you?" he asked.

"My business?" Ola repeated, pausing. "I am a Gateless Wolf, a follower of the path of Enigma."

"Seeing your outfit, there's no question what you are," Ord replied. "We're well-acquainted with the path of the Gateless Wolf. But what's your business?"

"I be'in a wanderer in search o' the lost and trooubled," Ola answered. "I roam the wilds hop'in to find travelers need'in help. I be'in in yorn lands in service to a missing Wood Cow, late of the Hedgelands, family of Emil, and now unknown."

A shadow passed briefly across Ord's happy face. "This Wood Cow —the Hedgelands, you say? There's many a missing beast that's n'er seen again in the Hedgelands," he said, looking grim. "You came out of the Everlost," Ord observed, "that means you're likely either escaping from someone, or hunting someone. No one goes into the Everlost on a lark. So, what's your business?" Ord's words were now cool and hard.

Ola was confused. "Why, I be'in a wander'in beast, no moore, no less. A help'in creature. I be only escap'in King Stuppy's rouges and cutthroats. Why do yor welcome a stranger with such questions? Yorn own good beast sense knows well that what I say be'in true." Ola suddenly leaped up and swung into the rough-hewn rafters of the farmhouse. Hanging by his feet he looked at Ord with twinkling eyes. "If yor need'in more proouf that I be'in a true Gateless Wolf, I'll just be'in play'in yor a tune on my flute," Ola said, putting this flute to his lips.

"Now, you're a feisty one," Ord returned, shaking his head with a renewed affection. "I'm glad you're full of spirit, a feisty one! But don't hold it hard against me...I had to test you. We'd be sorry later if you weren't what you say." Then, to Ola's astonishment, Ord himself swung up onto the rafter and hung by his feet too!

"Yor be'in a Gateless Wolf!" Ola exclaimed. "No other creature knows how to be hang'in like that."

"And what did you think?" Ord replied. "Did you imagine that all the Gateless Wolves are wandering youngsters like yourself?"

There was no need to say more. Ola and Ord both dropped to the floor and embraced like long-lost brothers. Pulling up chairs before the fire, they fell into animated conversation. Talking far into the night, they barely stopped for the dinner that Mar-Marie and Emil prepared.

Emil listened with interest as he and Mar worked on the other side of the room. Much of the talk bore no special interest for him. But a change in his manner of disinterested attention occurred when Ord explained how he and Mar had chosen to settle in the remote unsettled lands along the crest of the Everlost.

"We are pioneers of a sort," Ord said. "Mar and I made our homestead here nearly thirty years ago. I grew up in a clan of sea-faring Norder Wolves, and for a long time the wanderlust of that life carried me along. I sailed for some years as a young rip," he continued. "But later I grew tired of the sea, and followed the Gateless Wolf path. Although I loved the practice of Enigma and the rest of the Gateless Wolf ways, the lonely life of wandering from place to place did not satisfy me. I could not ignore the promptings of my heart that something was missing. Especially when I first laid eyes on Mar-

Marie! Seeing her made me feel like the Gateless Wolf life would be so much more wonderful if she would go along with me. So, I asked her to take to the Gateless Wolf path with me."

"Yor did what?" Ola exclaimed. "Yor asked Mar to take to the Gateless Wolf ways?" Ola's head was spinning. Such a thing had never been heard of before. A female following the way of the Gateless Wolf?

Seeing that Ola was speechless, Ord continued. "Calm yourself, Ola," he said. "Keep listening! If you wonder at what I did, I hope you see how it might be possible to be even stronger on the path, even though I have left the path." Ord paused, looking fondly at Ola, as if waiting for something.

Ola looked puzzled for a moment, then exploded: "Enigma!" he laughed. "Yor an old Gateless Wolf still!" Ola cried.

Ord told Ola that Mar-Marie had said that the Gateless Wolf path was not for her. "She said that the Gateless Wolf life was fine for me, but she wanted to do something that helped more folk than one traveler here or there."

"Now, don't get me wrong," Mar chimed in from where she and Emil were preparing dinner, "What I actually told him was that wandering around helping creatures you happen to stumble over is fine, but what I wanted was to help the masses of creatures you know are in trouble without waiting to stumble over them!"

"And how are yor do'in that?" Ola asked.

"We've been farming here all these years," Mar replied. "We're about the only creatures out in this land, but a few other pioneers are beginning to come."

"I'm glad to hear it," Ola responded.

"Oh, don't be too glad of it," Ord said. "Our whole service to the Gateless Wolf path depends on not too many people being around. We'd rather not have too many neighbors!"

"How does farm'in—here all by yorn lonesome—follow the Gateless Wolf path?" Ola asked.

"Well," Ord replied slowly, looking to Mar to see how far he should go in his explanation. Seeing her nod, he went on, "Well, you see, Ola, we help slaves escape from the Hedgelands!"

"How?" Ola asked in astonishment.

"Ah! Well, that's a long story," Ord replied. "The sort of story where you end up hanging on the gallows if you happen to tell the wrong person." He sipped some hot tea that Emil had poured for him, got up, and stood at the side of the fire, with his heavy paw on the mantel.

"Could I make a guess, I wonder?" Ola asked. Ord allowed as how Ola could guess all he wanted.

With his heart beating rapidly, Ola rose out of his chair, and walked over to where Mar-Marie's broom rested in the corner of the room. Holding the broom like he had seen Mar do when she swept the path in front of their house, Ola began sweeping as he had seen Mar do earlier.

"Say, for instance," Ola said slowly, as he continued the sweeping motion, "that a group of escaped slaves happen'in to be pass'in down yorn path under cover of darkness. Say they carry'in no lamps for fear of call'in eyes upon them. Say they are stumbl'in along in the dark and need'in a place of refuge. Say they find an unusually clean and smooth place in the path." Ola paused, looking from Ord to Mar with excitement in his eyes. "Say that such an unusually clean and smooth spot in the path is a signal that yorn house is a safe-house for those same escaped slaves!"

Electrified looks passed between each person in the room. Ord smiled. "Well done, Ola!" he said. "You are now eligible to swing on the gallows with the rest of us."

"Well, some honors depend on the company," Ola laughed.

"Yes, Ola, dear friend, we've made a way for crowds of troubled creatures to find their way to safety. This is our lifework in the path of the Gateless Wolf!" Again he took both Ola's paws in his own. Mar-Marie and Emil came over and joined with Ola and Ord. Ola's eyes filled with tears as he realized the extreme danger these dear friends were surely in each day.

"Don't you mind us, Ola," Ord said, sensing his concern. "We've carried on these thirty years by ourselves and will carry on as long as we can. Don't fear for us."

"Is there no one else?" Ola asked.

"Oh, there be others, all right," Mar replied. "But it's that line we will not cross with you tonight. Too many count on our silence about them. We trust you completely," Mar continued, "but even the most trusted of us make mistakes. The more people, the more possibility of mistake. We cannot risk it with you. At least not yet."

A new thought suddenly occurred to Ola. The Coyote was missing. He had not seen a sign of PorNart-1604 or any of Mar and Ord's children since he had arrived. "I thought yor had a Coyote guest," Ola commented, "and some reputed children as well."

No one responded to the question, so Ola answered his own question. "Yorn don't really have all those children. Those are yorn helpers. Creatures who lead the escapees along to freedom. PorNart-1604 is one of them." Ola looked to Ord and Mar for confirmation.

"Close to the mark, Ola, but wide of the heart of the matter," Mar smiled. "We do have children, but they are all grown. We are not

young anymore. Yes, some lead those escaping to safety. Some have other reasons to be gone just now. Some live elsewhere. PorNart-1604 is not an escaped slave. Emil no doubt told you how he came to be here." Mar paused, looking fondly at Ord. "We're better people than when we came here. We're better because of the creatures that have visited. We learn from each of them. PorNart-1604 is rebuilding the balloon. He thinks he can repair it and improve it. We hope to use it to carry on our work!"

"How do you mean?" Ola asked.

"Well, let's just say it's a very long walk from the Hedgelands," Ord said with a wink. "PorNart-1604 is up in the hills for a time. He's building a workshop and forge to make new parts." Mar put a finger to her husband's lips.

"No more just now, Ord. We've trusted this new friend with a great deal tonight. Let us see how it goes on for a while. Caution is necessary."

So saying, the talk on this subject ended for the night, with conversation moving on to happier topics. All told jokes and laughed until their jaws hurt. Gradually the night slipped away. Ola was thoughtful. He resolved to stay with Mar and Ord for a time to see what other new things he might learn.

# Welcome, Woonyak!

"AYYYIEEEE!" Breister was surprised to hear the long scream coming from his mouth. He was supposed to be drowned, dead, submerged in a watery grave. Yet he was aware that he was screaming. "AYYYIEEEE! YAAAAHHHHH!" He was tumbling, falling, spinning head over heels, falling, falling, screaming...

How long he fell he did not know. It seemed like a very long time, yet could not have been very long. The river poured through a massive hole in the rock—the whirlpool leading into a tunnel through the rock that sent the surging river deep underground. The rock tunnel opened out into a huge underground cavern, spilling and spraying the watery flow out of an opening at the top. The water fell from the high ceiling of the cavern like a waterfall. The cascade of water fell from such a height that, by the time it landed in the lake, it was dispersed into mist and a powerful rain-like downpour.

KERSPLOOSH! With a tremendous splash, the burly Wood Cow plunged into the cold water of the lake. In the pitch-blackness, Breister's eyes were so useless that it was as if he had lost his sight. From the sound, he sensed he was in a huge cavern. How far underground he was he could not guess.

The lake was deep enough that Breister could not touch the bottom. Exhausted, deeply chilled by his long exposure to the frigid waters, and struggling against despair, Breister paddled out of the direct fall of the water. Gasping for breath, he was grateful that there seemed to be no strong current in the lake to fight. He floated quietly, sculling only enough to stay afloat, catching his breath for the first time since the Cougar had attacked him. Breister did not know where he was, but he was deeply grateful to simply be able to rest.

"Ahhh, to rest...beautiful rest...sweet, blissful rest," he thought. "So tired, so very, very tired...can't move my arms and legs...so tired...too tired...need to rest..." The fight against the Cougar, the brutal pounding by the water and rocks in the river, the lung-ripping, gasping struggle to breathe, the numbing cold of the water—all this punishment had left him limp with fatigue. His strength ebbing away, Breister lapsed into unconsciousness. As the muscles of his neck relaxed, his face pitched forward into the water. The biting cold of the water had no effect in reviving him, but rather dragged him deeper

into icy rest.

"Hunjah! Woonyak!" Breister heard the strange words as if they came to him from a far away place. They seemed friendly and inviting. He turned to look in the direction of the voice and found that his eyes were closed. Forcing them to open against a powerful desire to sleep, Breister saw a frightful-looking Sheep bending over him. The Sheep wore the hair around her head close-cropped, and had brightly-colored designs swirling around her eyes and ears. She was robed in an intricately embroidered caftan, which emphasized her startling appearance. Fantastic animals leaped and pranced in the designs and a large, many-colored bird with two sets of wings clutched a sun in its talons. Sharp bone needles held her clothing together, and long curling bone hooks, painted with stripes, were laced through her cheeks.

Was this another wild hallucination? It did not seem terrifying. Breister's confused thoughts struggled to make sense of it, but could not, and he lapsed back into sleep.

Awaking some time later, Breister found himself lying on a pallet of soft feathers. Several brilliant shafts of sunlight cut long, sloping beams through the semi-darkness. He realized that he was no longer wet. Somehow, a soft, bright green sheet of cloth that wrapped across his body and tied at the shoulder had replaced his wet clothes, toga-style.

"Hunjah!" The apparent greeting announced the reappearance of the strange Sheep, accompanied by a servant, who brought a steaming drink to Breister. He gulped the hot beverage greedily. A sharp, but not unpleasant, spicy sweetness had a stimulating effect, making him feel refreshed and warmed after his long immersion in the frigid water.

"Hunjah!" the strange Sheep repeated, kneeling down by Breister. "We welcome you, Woonyak," she continued. "It has been a long time since we have had such a great Woonyak among us. Hunjah!"

"Excuse me, friend," Breister replied, "but I don't understand you. Why do you call me Woonyak?" Breister was very grateful for his apparent rescue and the care that the friendly Sheep was showing him, but he was also curious.

The Sheep looked kindly at Breister. "You are a 'fallen one'—a Woonyak in our tongue—one who has fallen through the OmpotoWoo. You would say it was the 'Great Tear' or 'Place Where the World is Torn.' Few of your kind have ever fallen. It is an honor and privilege that you came to us. Hunjah!"

"There are more of you?" Breister burst out excitedly. He realized how much he wished to know. There were others? Who were they? Where was he?

“I am WooZan, chief of the WooSheep. I pulled you from the OmpotoWoo and brought you here. I thought you were dead when I found you. I brought you to the Golden Grotto to heal and recover. Hunjah!” Sweeping her extended arm with royal dignity, she drew Breister’s gaze around the large cavern where he found himself. Light streamed through skylights—variously sized jagged openings in the rock—scattered across the high vault of the grotto. A wondrous, ethereal lutescence sparkled here and there with a deep golden glitter as the light played on the mineral formations. The effect was otherworldly, unlike anything Breister had ever seen. The sparkling glitter…Was it real gold? He wondered without speaking.

“No, it is not what you call ‘real gold’…” WooZan commented, smiling at Breister. “You are surprised that I read your thoughts?” she continued. “Woonyaks are all the same. They think that what they call ‘real gold’ is so dear and precious that they think only of that,” WooZan said shaking her head. “This Golden Grotto sparkles with the light from above that gives its loveliness to the simple, plain rocks of the Grotto. Without the light, the rocks are very simple and humble. Yet see what glory they gain from the light!”

Breister looked about in astonishment. Far above their heads, the cavern had several openings to the outside. Shafts of sunlight beamed into the cavern through the ragged holes in the rock. He had never seen, or imagined, such a thing. The cavern, far underground, was open to the world outside! Breister felt a surge of delirious happiness course through him. He could escape the underground! He could search for Helga!

“You are thinking about the other world,” WooZan observed. “Your eyes are fixed on the LuteWoo, and you are thinking about escape.” Breister looked at WooZan with surprise. She had once again seemed to read his thoughts.

“No, I do not read thoughts,” WooZan said. “You think because I know what you are thinking, that I can see inside your mind. No. No. I only know the feelings that you feel so well that I need not be told what they are. Since the first day of the WooSheep, our folk have known these feelings. No Woonyak that has joined the WooSheep over the ages has ever had a different thought than you. I know exactly what to expect from you. Hunjah!”

Breister looked at the WooSheep chieftain with curiosity. “There are many Woonyaks?” he asked.

“Yes, but it is still a great occasion for us when a Woonyak comes,” WooZan replied. “Over a thousand, thousand lifetimes, there is time for many Woonyaks and each one brings something new to the WooSheep. Their coming is a great event among our folk. The first of our people were Woonyaks. Our stories tell about them. And the fall

of each Woonyak is a great event—a renewal of our story and our people. There will be a story about you, also. As you become an elder among the WooSheep your story will be honored, it will be drawn on the walls of the Deep Caves, where all our great stories are recorded. You will be buried there also…your story will be with you forever."

"Whoa there, WooZan…Now, wait just a minute!" Breister protested. "You may know the Woonyaks you have seen in the past, but I'm a different case. I'm not staying here. I'm leaving to find my daughter. You've been very kind to me and I'm very grateful to you for saving my life, but—"

"—but you have seen the LuteWoo, and you think you can escape from this world?" As before, it was less a question, than a statement of fact.

"That's exactly right," Breister replied. "I'm getting out of here, just as soon as I learn the way."

"No one leaves the WooSheep, friend," WooZan said quietly.

"What do you mean?" Breister said, feeling a new sense of anxiety.

"There is no way out," the WooSheep explained. "There is no way to leave here. There are only the OmpotoWoo, which gives us our way of living, and the LuteWoo which reminds us of the promise of the afterlife."

"But the LuteWoo is open to the outside!" Breister exclaimed. "Surely there is a way—"

"To climb out of this world?" WooZan completed the sentence. "See how well I know your feelings? All Woonyaks think exactly alike. Hunjah! There is no way out. But there is the promise of the life to come."

Breister's mind was reeling. Could it be true? Was he condemned to live here to the end of his days?

Breister sank into thoughtful silence. After a short time WooZan observed, "You are thinking that I must be wrong—that there must be a way to leave this world. Am I right?"

"Yes! Yes! That's exactly right!" Breister exploded. "You think you are so smart. You think you can sit there and know what I am thinking. Well, you're wrong! I'm getting out of here, and you can think whatever you want about that!"

"It's not what I want to think, friend; it is the reality of things. Our stories tell that ages ago, the folk we now know as the WooSheep lived in the high, high mountains. We were simple Planting Sheep and happy with our life. But a time of great sickness came over that land and our folk became very sick. Many died. At last, the sickness was so great that our chiefs said it was best to leave our homes. Many of us loaded our belongings onto boats and tried to float down the river. Many died in the rapids. Many more fell through the OmpotoWoo and

lived. Those became the WooSheep."

Breister was silent for a long time. WooZan honored this silence. After some time, Breister said, "Why can't we ascend through the LuteWoo? Has anyone tried?"

"The LuteWoo is the home of the Fire Beetles," WooZan responded. "The Fire Beetles excrete an acid that covers their bodies. Touch it and your skin burns like fire for days. Over the thousands of years the Fire Beetles have lived there, the small bit of the acid clinging to their feet has gradually dissolved the rock, making the natural skylights above our heads. That, and the fact there is no way to reach the openings, makes it impossible to leave, even should one want to go. Hunjah!"

"Should one want to?" Breister repeated. "Why would one not want to leave?" Breister asked incredulously.

"Woonyaks are all the same," WooZan observed again. "A Woonyak falls through the OmpotoWoo and, if they survive, they have been so near death that they have seen the end of their lives before them. Then, those that survive eventually find their way into the Golden Grotto, where they can, at last, get out of the water. As you have seen, the Golden Grotto is incredibly beautiful, even otherworldly. The combination of magnificent beauty and the joy of simple survival gives Woonyaks the sense of having been saved by a miracle. Is that not what you, yourself, believe?"

Breister had to admit that he did have some of that feeling. The despair of being utterly lost, the struggle against the river, the fearsome whirlpool and the certainty of death, the long fall into the darkness not knowing what might be at the bottom, the sense of immediate, inevitable doom...all this created an almost insane sense of release when one did not die.

"Surely your survival was a miracle, yes? Isn't that what you believe?" WooZan spoke softly, yet with an unsettling conviction. Breister did not know exactly what to think about the WooSheep chieftain.

"You have been delivered by the Great Power, saved from extinction," WooZan continued. "When Woonyaks see the LuteWoo they think of escape. Then they learn that there is no escape and they rage against that. Then they gradually realize that there truly is no escape and they come to love the life of the WooSheep. They come to the Golden Grotto and worship the Great Power that saved them. They find peace in the promise of the afterlife here. The WooSheep have all that is needed. All Woonyaks come to see this. They learn that they have no further need for the other world. WooSheep do not even believe they can reach the other world before death. All Woonyaks come to see this. Hunjah!"

Breister said nothing. He saw there was no reason to argue with

WooZan further.

“Come. Come with me and we will eat with the WooSheep brethren. It is the time of Common Bowl.”

WooZan showed Breister a small boat, just large enough for the two of them and her attendant. They boarded the boat and the servant began to paddle through the darkness. Leaving the Golden Grotto, WooZan explained: “The Golden Grotto is a place for retreat and reflection only. I, WooZan, come here daily to reflect on my duties as chieftain. Woonyaks are also brought there immediately after being rescued. It assures them that they are truly safe and delivered after their terror. The entire community of WooSheep comes here on the Days of Great Light—the days when the light is brightest from the LuteWoo. Hunjah!”

“But how do you live down here?” Breister wanted to know. He could not believe that beasts could actually survive in such a place. As they left the Golden Grotto, the darkness gradually again became so intense that Breister could not see WooZan, although she sat just a few feet away. “Surely you can’t just live...”

“Just live here like ‘normal’ beasts?” WooZan said, shaking her head. “Woonyaks are all the same. You do not believe, yet. But you will believe when you see! Hunjah!”

Although the complete darkness left Breister unable to see anything, WooZan’s servant seemed to paddle with a purpose toward a definite destination. Then, they apparently rounded a corner and Breister saw a dazzling sight. Thousands of lanterns glittered within a huge, water-filled grotto. “Welcome, Woonyak, to WooPeace,” WooZan said. “Hunjah!”

Breister was astounded. Hundreds of houses were carved into the rock. Wherever he looked, lanterns twinkled in rock-hewn windows. The rock-houses were built at all heights. Some were just above water level. Others were far up the sides of the grotto, reached by narrow, winding stairways carved in the rock. “The OmpotoWoo gives us our life,” WooZan observed. “Wood and other items from smashed boats, other kinds of driftwood, fresh fish, and new Woonyaks who join and refresh our folk!”

Breister had lost all sense of time. How long had he been below the surface of the earth? What day was it? What time was it? Such questions seemed not to matter to WooZan.

Tying up the boat at a landing, WooZan stepped out of the boat and said, “Come, join in the Common Bowl; you are welcome among us. Hunjah!”

Breister followed WooZan up several flights of stairs onto a large landing where many creatures were gathered to eat. The WooSheep, Breister saw, were not all Sheep. There were many other kinds of

beasts as well—Foxes, Cougars, Coyotes, Goats, Badgers, and Rabbits.

WooZan watched Breister's reaction to what he was seeing. "Yes, the WooSheep are a diverse folk," she commented. "Woonyaks come from many clans. But any who join the life of the WooSheep become one of us. The WooPeace is for all. Our life is for all. Our hospitality is for all."

And the hospitality was, indeed, marvelous, Breister discovered. He feasted with the WooSheep until his gut hurt. The WooSheep used fire in their candles, oil lanterns, and a few other ways, but not in their cooking. All food was eaten raw, usually marinated in a vast array of tasty sauces. Fish was the basic staple of the WooSheep diet, but the array of fish dishes was vast. On his first plateful, Breister had Shadowgrass and Smeed Smod Salad, Spicy Salamander Soup, Thick Cave Bass Frumplets, Deep Grotto Bat Cream Sauce, and Rawski Booglehead Filets with Moondles. Breister would not have believed such scrumptious foods could exist underground. His stomach was definitely impressed with the WooPeace!

Breister learned that the WooSheep used almost every element of the underground world for something. In a world that Breister had thought was limited, the WooSheep had found great abundance. As Breister ate happily and laughed with his new friends, he felt a deep sense of love and acceptance. The WooSheep warmly opened their life to him. He felt accepted and happy. Yet, one question kept puzzling him.

"The river pours so much water into the underground," Breister asked. "Where does it all go? The water level does not rise, although there is constantly new water pouring in through the OmpotoWoo...The water is getting out somewhere. Your folk are brilliant, WooZan; surely they have explored this question. Surely, the water must somehow flow out. Isn't there a way to follow the water out of here?"

"All Woonyaks think this way at first," WooZan replied. "They constantly fight against the reality of our life. Until they discover that the only peace is to become part of the WooPeace. There is no peace apart from the WooPeace. Hunjah!"

"Has any beast ever tried?" Breister asked again.

WooZan looked at Breister solemnly. "There is no peace apart from the WooPeace. It is the only way. All Woonyaks come to see this. So, too, will you," WooZan repeated.

"But has anyone tried?" Breister asked with firm resolve. "Has anyone tried to find a different way than just sitting here accepting the story that there is no way out?"

"It is not a story, friend," WooZan replied sharply. "There is only one way and that is the way of the WooPeace. To go apart from it is to

die. Hunjah!"

"But, WooZan, I keep asking you if any beasts have tried?" Breister said.

"There is no peace apart from the WooPeace. To go apart from it is to die," WooZan repeated. "This is the truth you must find. You will find it for yourself. The water flows out in a myriad of small springs and seepages, but there is no river flowing out. The only way to survive is the WooPeace. But you must find this truth for yourself. Spend some days and nights in the Golden Grotto. Meditate on its beauty and the bounty and fellowship you have found here. Rejoice in the miracle that saved your life. Reflect on the reality of the situation. You will find your way into the WooPeace. We will warmly welcome you. You will become family to us. All Woonyaks feel the same. We show them the Golden Grotto and the WooPeace and give them time in the Golden Grotto to meditate. They all come to understand the truth. There is no peace apart from the WooPeace. Hunjah!"

"Thank you, WooZan," Breister said. "I appreciate your kindness, but I already have a family. Tomorrow, I will begin my work of finding my daughter."

Later, as WooZan and her servant conducted Breister back to the Golden Grotto, neither said anything. In this instance, both knew what the other was thinking.

Before turning in to sleep in the Golden Grotto, Breister sat gazing out through the LuteWoo. One by one, he saw stars begin to twinkle in the night sky. They passed before his gaze, as the turning earth brought different stars past the LuteWoo 'window.' It seemed to Breister that the 'other world' was spinning past him as he lay helplessly alone, deep within the earth.

# Slasher Annie Meets WooZan

Water from the OmpotoWoo fell in a downpour on the figure of Slasher Annie. Sprawled across a piece of debris from her smashed boat, she struggled out of the main flow of the waterfall. Dazed and hurt by the fall through the whirlpool and the destruction of her stolen boat, Annie felt a little uncertain whether she was dead or alive. As she considered her situation, she realized that she seemed to be alive, but she wasn't sure what that meant at that moment.

"Where am I?" she thought to herself. "Am I dead and this is the gates of the underworld? Or is this some underground lake?" In the complete blackness, her eyes were useless. The downpour from the waterfall was deafening, making it impossible to hear beyond the closest sounds. It was as if everything she had known before had vanished.

Panic-stricken, Annie slashed at the water, paddling with all her strength. Unable to see where she was going, she had no direction or goal, except to escape the unending sound and flow of the cascading water. The terrified Cougar swam with insane intensity. Trying to get...where?

At last, finding nothing but water and more water, unable to escape the roar of the falls, crazed with the terror that perhaps this was eternity and there was no escape, Annie sank into exhausted immobility, sobbing with the terror of one completely without hope of safety and deliverance.

"Hunjah! Woonyak!" Peering into the intense blackness with eyes closed to narrow slits by fear, Slasher Annie could see nothing. Then a strong grasp pulled her into a boat. Feeling a strange sense of peace flood over her, Annie did not lash out with her claws as would usually have been her instinctive response to such a situation. Instead she went limp with exhaustion and collapsed in the bottom of WooZan's boat.

# In the Bone Forest

Helga's small party followed the sand ridge for several days. Gradually, the terrain began to change. The watery marshes and wetlands of the Drownlands gave way to firmer ground and drier country. With each step they left the Drownlands further behind and the land became sun-baked and harsh.

The rugged land became more and more difficult to travel. When not strewn with rocks, hillsides were slippery with sand. Finding it too exhausting to climb the forbidding bluffs or sandy slopes, the tiny band followed an easier, but somewhat longer route along the lower, more level ground.

The lush marshes of the Drownlands gave way to bare, yellow-brown sandstone as far as the eye could see. Except for scattered patches of dry grass, there was no vegetation. With each step they took, there was less evidence of water. The provisions they had carried with them would soon be gone. Especially, their dwindling water supply was of great concern.

Ominously, they came upon what appeared to be the remains of one of King Stuppy's exploring parties. Strung out across the treeless waste, one by one, they came upon the skeletons of the King's explorers sent to look for the Mountain That Moves But Stands Still.

"Look at these fools!" Bwellina commented as they walked past the gruesome remains. "They died rather than leave their banners, golden ensigns, uniforms, and weapons behind."

"It's true," Helga replied. "Although they were dying of thirst, they never discarded their heavy uniforms and still carried along their useless paraphernalia!"

"And still dragging their canoe!" Burwell observed, shaking his head in disbelief. "Miles and miles from water, dropping dead one by one, yet even to the last beast, carrying King Stuppy's golden ensign..." Burwell's voice trailed off as he stood looking down at the eerie remains. "This poor beast staggered a few more steps beyond the last of his comrades, clutching the heavy gold, and then collapsed with it wrapped in his arms. Poor fool—"

"There, but for the blessing of the Ancient Ones, go we," Helga replied grimly. "We may well be fools in other ways. Just because we avoid one road to folly, does not mean we will not take another. If we

do not find water soon, we will perish just as surely."

"Well, the Ancient Ones are all about us," Bwellina exclaimed, pointing ahead. "It is no wonder they call this the Bone Forest!"

Massive bones poked out at all angles from eroded hills and bluffs. An ancient graveyard of giant beasts was being revealed by the erosion of centuries.

"The Bone Forest!" Helga breathed, feeling for the first time real hope that perhaps she could find her father. The astonishing sight of ancient fossils, and the recent reminder of how deadly this land could be, left Burwell and Bwellina in solemn silence. It seemed hard to be hopeful. But Helga's heart was truly happy for the first time in many months. Had her father been here? Had he gazed at this landscape she was now seeing? Would she find clues here that would help her find him? Somehow, she sensed she was on his track.

Helga's band of stalwart friends trudged onward, moving deeper into the Bone Forest. Burwell lagged behind, awe-struck by the fossilized bones. He began climbing up an eroded hillside.

"Burwell!" Bwellina called. "Where in the name of good beasts are you going?"

"This is the land I have always dreamed about," Burwell yelled back, excitedly. "Since I was a wee beast, sittin' on my Mama's lap, I've been hearing stories of the Ancient Ones, the greatest beasts that ever lived, the giants of old! Here they are! All around us! I want to pay my respects. I want to imagine what it was like when they ruled the earth! I want to sit a while among them. Just a little while, my dear...Just a little while on the hill taking it all in. Yep! Yep! Yep!" Burwell kept climbing.

Helga looked at Bwellina and sighed. "Well, I guess we could sit a spell and rest," she mused.

"But, Helga," Bwellina protested, "every second we sit, I become thirstier, and my life ebbs away. If we don't keep moving, we have no hope of finding water. We'll sit here and become dusty bones ourselves! We've got to keep moving." She called after Burwell again. "Burwell! Now you come back here. You can look at the Ancient Ones anytime you want—just as soon as we find water! Get back here, you sun-silly scalawag!"

"No, my dear," the old dog wheezed back, as he continued his scramble up the hillside. "I'll not just walk by the remains of the Ancient Ones without remembering them with due respect. I've waited my whole life for this chance, which I never thought I'd get. I'd rather die of thirst than move on just now! Yep! Yep! Yep!"

"Let's do wait a bit," Helga said to Bwellina. A few minutes cannot hurt us that much...and Burwell is right. I have so often called on the memory of the Ancient Ones to help me...I want to do what is proper."

She stopped and reached for the water pouch slung over her shoulder. “Here, Bwellina, wash your mouth out with a sip of water…Just a small sip, we have to make it last as long as we can.”

Taking a sip for herself, Helga swished it around in her parched mouth, savoring it. Slumping down by a boulder, which provided some shade, she gazed across the expanse of the Bone Forest. She felt an overpowering sense of gratitude. “Oh, thank you, Ancient Ones, thank you,” she breathed. Helga’s reliance on the help of the Ancient Ones had never failed her. Surely, somehow they would assist her.

# WooSheep Bottoms

"Lookee out ya big galoop! Here I come! YAHOOOO!" KER-SPLASH! Winert Otter landed in the swimming hole, creating a tremendous wave, right beside Ferrker Coyote. Both of them laughed as the huge splash washed over them. It was almost the end of summer and Winert, Ferrker, and their other best friend, Snorrnt Sheep were among the several dozen other youngsters enjoying the swimming hole at WooSheep Bottoms.

"WheeZEEE! LOOOK AT ME!" Snorrnt screamed happily as he swung on a long rope out over the shady pool and let go. KER-SPLOOSH! He was followed by others swinging on several other ropes from other directions. KER-SPLASH-SPLASH-SPLASH-SPLOOSH! Happy little beasts ran to swing again, pushing and shoving to get in line.

Swimming back to the bank, Snorrnt was about to yell, "You can't make one like that, you big galoop!" when he stopped. "Who in the world is that?" he wondered, seeing a dusty old Dog standing on a hilltop not far away. The stranger's clothes were worn and dirty, and he looked very tired.

But, he soon learned the old beast was not too tired to run. In a flash, he was running full speed down the hill and diving, clothes and all, into the pool! Burwell Oswego had never felt such a glorious feeling in all his life. His worn, tired, parched body was immersed in the most wonderful cool, clear water! "YAAHOOOO! GOORGLE-OOOO! SPLASH! SPLOOSH!" Leaping and diving like some crazed monster fish, Burwell left all the young beasts howling with laughter at his antics.

Finally, exhausted, he pulled himself up on the bank, gasping happily for breath. "Woooo, whew...That was so wonderful," he wheezed with contented delight. Gazing dreamily out of his half-closed eyes, he might have simply dozed happily off into a nap, had he not seen a sight that made him burst out in wheezing laughter.

Bwellina was running down the hillside toward him. Helga hobbled quickly after her, also heading straight for the swimming hole. KER-SPLASH-SPLASH! Clothes and all, she too plunged in with glorious joy!

Winert and Ferrker looked at one another. "Wow!" Ferrker said,

“Hey, Cow-Lady, that was super!”

Helga, spouting cool, clear water out of her mouth, laughed. “You haven’t seen anything yet! Just let me have a chance at that rope swing and I’ll show you some waves you’ll remember!”

The travelers discovered that for many, many miles they had been struggling along within easy reach of water. The dry lands they had been traveling sat atop a wealth of underground water. Spreading out from the Drownlands, the huge aquifer was completely hidden in most places. What seemed to be a “barren wasteland” actually contained plenty of water, if you knew where to look. The top of the vast reservoir was deep underground in some places, but as at the swimming hole, it was at the surface in valleys between hills. Water so close to the surface produced a large number of lakes, “wet” meadows, and constantly flowing streams—in close proximity to large expanses of parched lands. WooSheep Bottoms, as residents called the area, had an abundant, but mostly invisible, supply of water.

“Had we only climbed to the hilltops sooner...” Helga thought ruefully, as she sat on the bank splashing in the cool water. “But I guess the Ancient Ones had their own ways,” she reflected. “There probably is a reason that I should be here. That is the way of the Ancient Ones.” The happy yells of the young beasts swimming and splashing seemed to assure Helga’s heart that she, too, could again be happy.

The travelers were invited to join in the annual community picnic that was being held that day. In a shady grove of cottonwood trees, all the beasts of WooSheep Bottoms were gathered. Helga was surprised to find that the ‘WooSheep’ were actually, for the most part, not Sheep at all.

“WooSheep Bottoms is the home of all sorts of beasts,” Vernerdta Otter, the mother of Winert, explained as she led Helga through the serving line. “The Bottoms got its name from the first settlers, who were WooSheep. But over the years many other beasts of all kinds have settled here and been welcomed. We all came here for the same reason—so, even though we’re Otters, Sheep, Coyotes, Ducks, Foxes, Rabbits, we live together in peace. We’re all WooSheep, because it’s our home, not because we’re all Sheep. Nobody cares about that.”

“Why does anyone come here?” Helga asked. “The land all around is so barren and forbidding. You must not get many visitors?”

“We’ve seen only a few strangers in many years,” Vernerdta replied. “It’s very rare that anyone crosses the Great Barrens and survives. We are happy to have visitors, but we’re also glad they are rare. We like being protected from the outside world. Our life is happy and simple. We have all we need.”

Helga was quiet in her reflections as she filled her plate with the

luscious food, which was spread out on long tables. Sweet Meadow Greens Salad with Roasted Sunflower Seeds and Dried Cherries, Pecan-Crusted Pan-Baked Crayfish, Thrice-Whipped Cream Cheese Soufflé with So-Hot Pepper Sauce, Trumpet Rolls and Butter, Mulberry Pie, Apple-Pear Turnovers, and Watermelon. Everyone also took Glory Bars that were being distributed in beautifully wrapped packages to each person. The scrumptious sweet was unlike anything Helga had ever tasted before. A crisp, golden pastry crusted with nuts was filled with creamy nougat filling and blackberries at the center.

Helga found a seat next to Burwell and Bwellina, who were stuffing themselves happily. Vernerdta was showing them how to extract the sweet meat from the hard shells of the crayfish. Helga was watching this with great interest, when her ears suddenly heard something that made her nearly drop her fork.

# Annie and Breister's Search

Breister lay in the Golden Grotto staring up through the LuteWoo, as the light gradually failed. Night was coming in the outside world. As the gloom deepened into the most complete darkness he could imagine, the only remaining light was the distant twinkling of stars he could see through the LuteWoo. They seemed so tiny and so few that the outside world was almost more a hope—even an illusion—than reality.

"Hang onto your mind, Breister, hang on to your mind!" he urged himself. As he lay in the darkness, the eerie knowledge of how easy it would be to lose contact with the feelings and perceptions of the outside world touched him like a cold hand. "If I stay here, soon, very soon, that world will no longer exist for me. It will be a dream. Even now I feel its reality slipping away from me. WooZan is right. If I stay here, the only hope is to join the WooPeace. I will go mad living down here by myself. Either I escape or join the WooPeace...But the WooPeace is not a life. I must find Helga."

Breister sat gazing at the small patches of starry sky that he could see through the skylights far above. Most were too small to be more than dim pinpricks of light, but a few were brighter and could be seen passing across the opening. His mind returned again and again to the same question: "If the cave is open to the outside world through those skylights, why does no one find the openings? Surely over the years some beast must have seen them? If someone sees them, why does no one come here from the outside?" Muttering the question to himself over and over, Breister was baffled. Was there truly no way out?

Immersed in these endless wonderings, he heard a faint swish. Breister could make out the eerie light of lanterns mounted on a boat. They glinted off of the water as the boat approached. Here and there the walls of the grotto sparkled in the glow of the lanterns. Soon WooZan had arrived with a passenger in her boat. A Cougar! In the faint light, it was hard to be certain, but it certainly looked like it might be the partner of the Cougar who had fallen in the river with Breister. Breister immediately stood up and took a coldly distant stance.

"You know the Woonyak, I see," WooZan commented. "You hate her. She has wronged you." Again, the uncanny ability of the Sheep to

anticipate Breister's thoughts annoyed him.

"Hunjah! Do not be annoyed with me, friend," WooZan said. "It is not my fault that our folk have existed so very long that we know the feelings of the Woonyaks that fall from above. I see your look. I see your tense muscles. It can only be hate. Hate comes when one feels wronged or when one is ignorant. You are not ignorant. You see it is not so difficult. Hunjah!"

Slasher Annie stepped out of the boat, looking around herself in amazement. Breister recognized the feelings of astonishment that he had also felt on first coming into the Golden Grotto. "You now see that you are not so different, yes?" WooZan observed, looking at Breister intently. "All Woonyaks are the same. Hate cannot last here. If you hate you die. There is life only in the WooPeace where hate is impossible. That is why we bring Woonyaks to the Golden Grotto and then to the WooPeace settlement. The true reality becomes clear."

Annie looked at WooZan with interest. "The fool," she thought to herself with some creeping feeling of contempt, "this Sheep is nothing but butterflies and air between her ears."

"Be careful, friend," WooZan said, turning and looking directly at Annie. "Ignorance is as dangerous as hate here. Those who have lived here in happy peace for centuries are not the fools. The fool is the one who thinks that the WooPeace is foolish. Hunjah!"

Startled at WooZan's seeming ability to know what she was thinking, Slasher Annie laughed nervously. "Oh, I wasn't really thinking you were a fool...It's just such a shock...to find...such a wonderful place to live!" Annie finished.

WooZan sighed. "You cannot flatter us with empty praise. Your praise, today, is ignorant. You do not know your situation. You do not know the WooPeace. So, you praise out of ignorance. In a few days you will say the WooPeace is a wonderful place to live and mean it. Say such a thing then. Hunjah!"

WooZan reached into the boat and pulled out a bundle of sticks. Slapping the bundle on her legs, the Sheep began to chant in a singsong voice. Sometimes she jumped from foot to foot in high arching leaps. Shortly the singing and leaping stopped and WooZan began to get back in her boat. "Farewell, friends," she said, paddling away. "I have signaled the Fire Beetles that you are here and asked that they not harm you. You will be safe. You have food and fish-oil candles enough for two days. That is usually enough for Woonyaks to flirt with madness and come to the truth. I will return in two days. You will be ready to join the WooPeace then. Hunjah!"

WooZan had hardly paddled out of sight, when Breister said, "I don't know who you are, Cougar, and I don't care at this point. I'm leaving this place. You may come with me, or you may stay here. But

I'm leaving. So long as we're here we're as good as dead. This place is a tomb any way you look at it. It's pointless for me to hate you in my own tomb. What good is it? I'm leaving. You coming or staying?"

"Just as you say, this is a tomb," Annie replied. "It is either a real tomb that we can never escape"—she paused and held a fish-oil candle toward Breister's face—"or it is an illusion with no more reality than the shadows flickering on your face. We will find out which it is. Let's go!"

"But where do we go?" Annie continued a moment later. "There is water on one side; vertical, smooth walls on the other; and Fire Beetles above us, even if we could go up. Not promising."

"Wood Cows look to the virtues of the earth," Breister observed. "Before you came, I was lying here meditating and listening to the sounds of the rock. I heard many openings in the rock. Let me show you." Breister took a small pronghorn flute from his pocket. "This belongs to my daughter, Helga," he explained. "She's been teaching me to play it. I was playing it here a while ago and noticed that the echoes in this grotto are very interesting—at least to a Wood Cow!" he laughed.

Breister played a series of rough, halting notes from the flute. "You see, I'm not very good," he commented ruefully. "But listen to the echoes." He played another series of notes.

"I don't hear anything interesting," Annie said, thinking the Cow was perhaps a bit mad already.

"It's a Wood Cow art," Breister replied, "and, if you know what to listen for, it is very clear. The echoes tell where there may be openings in the rock." Breister played several more notes, listening intently.

"The water is shallow over there," he said, pointing. "If you don't mind getting wet, I think we will find an opening a few feet below the surface." That rock wall over there echoes like it is hollow. There are no openings on this side. But perhaps there are some below the water."

Although she looked at Breister as if he was, indeed, crazy, Annie smiled at him. "Cougars don't like water," she grimaced, "but I won't count this as water—this is tomb juice, and we like tomb juice even less than water!"

"Why don't we wait for daylight," Annie asked. "That will give us some better light to explore underwater. Our candles will be no use there."

"Daylight will not help us," Breister responded. "The water has too many minerals in it. It is very cloudy. We will have to feel our way along anyway. I want to get out of here. We might as well try it now."

Reluctantly, Annie agreed and stepped toward the water's edge.

"No, you wait here," Breister directed. "Let me explore first. I'll

come back and get you if I find an opening." Slasher Annie looked at Breister doubtfully. "Trust me, Annie. I will come back. It may take me a while, but I will find a way and be back for you. Stay here."

Agreeing, Annie settled down on the rocky bank of the Golden Grotto's lake as Breister dived under water. Over the next hour or so, she heard him repeatedly dive-surface-dive again. Then it was silent for a long time. Several hours passed. Annie grew worried, but realized worry made little difference. She was stranded in the Golden Grotto until either Breister or WooZan returned.

At last, she heard a splash and Breister gasping for air! Swimming back to where Slasher Annie waited, Breister panted: "There are ten outlets leading in all directions from the lake, several of them large enough for us to go through. But this cave was hardly designed for travel," Breister grimaced. "Only one of the ten possibilities shows hope of getting us out of here," Breister began slowly, before he broke into a broad smile. "But ONE IS ALL WE NEED! Come on, Annie, we're getting out of here!"

"There is one passage that works," Breister explained. "We dive down, slip through the opening and then swim for a minute or so before the passage leads into another chamber." He paused, then took a deep breath and exhaled. "You'll need a big lungful of air, it's a very long minute! Stay close to me. It's easy to miss the passage opening."

Looking grimly, but hopefully, at each other, Breister and Annie slipped into the cold water. Swimming carefully along, feeling the stone wall, Breister guided Annie to the place in the rock wall where they would dive to enter the underwater passageway. Taking a deep gulp of air, they dived and headed into the passage.

A long minute later, they surfaced gasping for air inside another chamber of the cave system. "This chamber is less open to the outside air," Breister noted. "It's cool and damp. The Golden Grotto was a little warmer and drier because it was open to outside air. Here the stone sweats and the air is musty. There's much less fresh air. Our hope is that this chamber also has some exits that will allow us to go further. There must be some kind of passage...I feel deep sediment and sand on parts of the rock floor. That means it floods periodically from the outside! We've just got to keep looking." Lighting the one fish-oil candle that had remained dry in its waterproof wrapper during their swim, they looked around the rocky chamber. It was much smaller than the previous one, and had no pools of water except for small puddles of water dripping from sweating rock.

Breister settled down and, in the flickering light, again took out the pronghorn flute. Playing softly, he once again listened carefully for echoes in the chamber and considered what that might tell him about passages to freedom. Little did Breister and Annie imagine that some

other ears were also listening to the music from the flute.

# JanWoo-Corriboo Knows Things

The afternoon sun was warm and a dry wind rustled the cottonwood leaves as Helga strode through the bustling crowd to fill her plate again. But she soon stopped. The WooSheep were packed so tightly around the serving tables that Helga saw little hope of getting close soon.

"Hmm, this might take us a little while," she said aloud, thinking that Burwell was at her elbow as he had been earlier.

A different, strange voice answered instead. "A little while? Well, at least it isn't one of those huge monster 'whiles' that eat small children for breakfast!"

Helga, startled by the strange answer, whirled around to see who had spoken. There were Burwell and Bwellina standing with bemused looks, and next to them a young female Fox dressed in khaki-colored shirt and breeches. Slightly built, and delicately-boned, the Fox appeared lithe and athletic. The reddish-blonde hair on her head was braided in rows of small cornrow braids running out from under the floppy cap she wore. Her eyes darted actively as she gazed at Helga through broad-lensed eyeglasses with wire frames.

"JanWoo-Corriboo, and pleased to meet you, I'm sure!" the Fox said, speaking so rapidly the Helga could hardly keep up. Moving constantly, pulsating with some internal rhythmic beat, she continued, "You're looking for the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still' I hear." JanWoo-Corriboo paused, looking at Helga, then concluded simply, "I know where it is."

Helga's eyes widened in surprise and then she looked seriously at the strange young Fox. "You do? Where is it?" she asked with cautious excitement.

"JanWoo-Corriboo knows a few things," she replied mysteriously. "She knows the hills and canyons all around. She knows the names of the Ancient Ones whose remains lie in the Bone Forest. She knows the story of the WooSheep. She knows how to make hot chocolate and brownies..." She stopped and grinned at Helga. "And she knows about the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still.'"

JanWoo-Corriboo was a prodigy. Barely eleven years-old, she was a brilliant explorer and prospector in the lands around WooSheep Bottoms. "The Bottoms are boring," she said, with a snort. "Too

comfortable. Too nicey-wicey. Too safe. Not enough danger and adventure. I like Rattlesnakes myself," she said, noticeably twisting a necklace she was wearing. "This is made from the rattles of a twelve-foot-long Rattler I wrestled last summer," she explained. "I didn't hurt the poor old fellow, but he did lose a bet I made with him. I bet him his rattles that I could beat him at wrestling. I won. That's the sort of thing I like." She grinned at her new friends.

"I'm not too partial to Rattlesnakes, especially big ones! Yep! Yep! Yep!" Burwell stammered. "How about you all go right ahead and tramp around with the Rattlesnakes and I'll stay here and enjoy the nicey-wicey, boring ol' Bottoms?" They all roared with laughter as Burwell spoke with a quaver in his voice. Helga knew that Burwell was a brave and reliable friend. The old Bayou Dog would be at her side whenever she was in danger.

"But, Burwell," Helga said, looking surprised, "I thought you were the one who wanted to see the Ancient Ones! I'll bet JanWoo-Corriboo can take you to the best places."

"Yes, that's all well and good," Burwell replied, "but I just don't want to join the Ancient Ones!"

"Not to worry," JanWoo-Corriboo commented. "Where we're going, there will be plenty of adventure without any Rattlesnakes!"

Burwell looked soberly at Helga. "Uh, Helga, do you think that's good news, or bad news?" he asked.

"It's neither," JanWoo-Corriboo was quick to reply, "whether it's good news or bad news depends on what we find. That's the adventure part that I like!"

"Ohhhh...I'm not going to like this!" Burwell sighed.

The three friends learned a great deal about the WooSheep that afternoon as they planned their trip to find the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still.'

JanWoo-Corriboo told them that the WooSheep had lived in the Bottoms for untold generations. The WooSheep were descendents of refugees escaping from another group of WooSheep that lived deep underground in caves.

"The other WooSheep claim to be the only WooSheep," she said, shaking her head. "They don't acknowledge that we even exist! The first stories of our folk tell of a great whirlpool in the far off mountains that sucked all things in its power into underground caves. That was the origin of the first WooSheep. Finding themselves unable to escape, the early WooSheep learned to survive underground and made a life for themselves there. They still searched for a way out, but gradually became more and more content with their lot. As the years went by, the WooSheep society became increasingly close-minded. A few brave and free-thinking WooSheep managed to find a passage out

of the caves—through the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still'—and they tried to get the other WooSheep to follow them out. But the traditions of the 'WooPeace' as they called it were, by then, too strong. No one would listen."

Helga and her friends were amazed. "There are WooSheep living below the ground?" Helga asked incredulously. "How can that be possible?"

"Oh, you can live there, all right," JanWoo-Corriboo responded. "There is plenty of fresh water because the big river up in the mountains flows through there. There are fish, crawdads, frogs, and salamanders to eat, and they have bred flightless birds for eggs and feathers and long-haired mice that they shear to make wool for cloth. They are quite self-sufficient."

"Isn't there any contact between the WooSheep in the Bottoms and those that live underground?" Helga asked. "Don't you communicate, at least?"

"Not in the least!" JanWoo-Corriboo said fiercely. "They are lost souls...fools who allow their WooZans to rule over them like tyrants! They get what they deserve. Once in a while, some beast will find an escape route and reach the Bottoms. We welcome these refugees, but beyond this we don't care what the WooSheep underground do. We do not exist to them, and they do not exist to us!"

Helga's head was spinning. It was too astonishing to comprehend.

"O.K...Well, let's see..." Helga looked at Burwell in bewilderment. For once, Helga was speechless.

"What about the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still?'" he asked. "Where is it and why does it have such a strange name?"

JanWoo-Corriboo was silent. Thinking that perhaps she had not heard him, Burwell repeated the question. "Where is the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still'?"

"I cannot tell you," JanWoo-Corriboo said.

"What?" Burwell said. "But you said you know where it is!"

"I do know where it is," JanWoo-Corriboo replied, "but I can't tell you where it is—it is the WooSheep law that no one talks about it. All contact with the WooPeace clan is forbidden. They are a dead people to us. And besides, they have Venom Bats guarding the entrance to the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still.' No one goes there, it is too dangerous." JanWoo-Corriboo smiled happily, as if she were excited about something.

Burwell, Bwellina, and Helga looked at one another. They knew why she was excited. "And that's exactly why you're so happy and excited to take us there!" Burwell sighed, looking at JanWoo-Corriboo. She smiled back, nodding her head happily.

"Ohhh...Woe is us!" Burwell moaned. "No Rattlesnakes, but now

we’ve got Venom Bats. What an improvement! Yep! Yep! Yep!”

# We're Getting Out of Here!

"Shoo-moo-loo...Shoo-moo-loo..La-ba-ta-da...La-ba-ba-ta-de...Shoo-moo-loo..La-ba-ta-doh..." The sound of a soft melodious humming caused Breister to nearly bite off the mouthpiece of the pronghorn flute! Jumping up, he and Annie peered through the darkness, looking for any clue to who could be there. The fish-oil candle flickered faintly, casting weird shadows of stalactites, stalagmites and other rocks.

"Shoo-moo-loo...La-ba-ta-da..." A paint-spattered Owl stepped from behind a rubble pile. The Owl, his grizzled feathers salt-n-pepper gray, wore a loose-fitting smock. Long shaggy feathers hung out around the smock in disheveled, wild tangles. He wore a baggy beret that drooped down on the left side of his head, and a large brass ring through his lower beak.

"Shoooo-moooo-looooooo, troots!" The Owl said in a soft, mellow, and barely audible voice. "Ya speckin las Kinshy?"

Breister and Annie just stared stupidly at the Owl, not comprehending a word he had said.

"O.K. then, you airyheads, I'll try again," the Owl said, changing voice tone and volume. "What I said was, 'Welcome, guests! Do you speak Kinshy?' But you have already answered my question with your silence. Obviously, you don't know Kinshy. Dadrot! And I was so hoping that I might at last have someone else who speaks Kinshy."

The Owl looked so sad and dejected that Breister said, "Now, don't take it hard, friend. We'd be glad to learn some Kinshy if you could help us get out of here."

Perking up, the Owl said happily, "Loooste meooon minder, dast wiffert!"

Breister, thinking the Owl was giving him something to practice, tried to repeat the same phrase. "Looooostemo nminerd astwiffter!"

The Owl broke into uproarious laughter. "Hooo, Hooo, Hooo, Ha-ha-ha! Do you know what you just said...Hoooo, Hoooo, Hooo, Haa-ha...You said...Hh, Hoooo, Hooo...I can't stand it...you said, 'Eat my toenail phlegm balls!' Hooo, Hooo, Hooo...oh, that's great! I like you already! Hooo, Hooo, Hoooo!" The Owl fell to the ground and rolled in laughter, kicking his feet high in the air, and flapping his wings in all directions.

Breister and Annie, feeling relieved to have met another apparently harmless creature, and infected by the Owl's silly laughter, laughed too.

Gradually, the Owl calmed down again. He stood up and adjusted his beret, which had fallen down over his eyes.

"Well, we'll have to practice that a bit!" he observed, chuckling. "But for now, tell me who you are and what you want."

Breister responded quickly. "We're lost and trying to find our way out of the caves. We want to get to the outside world. Do you know the way?"

The Owl pulled an artist's paintbrush from a pocket of his smock. He swished it through the air in a wild series of lightning fast strokes —almost like a sword fighter. "Did you get that? I just drew you a map to the outside!" The Owl chuckled again. "You see, I do know the way and I just showed it to you!"

"Now you wait just a minute, you wacko bag of feathers!" Annie stormed in fury. "If you know the way out of here, you've got to show us. You can't just stab at the air and expect us to know where to go!"

"Why not?" the Owl asked. "You already know the way out of here, or you wouldn't be standing here talking to me."

"What?" Breister and Annie said, almost in the same breath. "What do you mean we already know the way out?"

"You have come from the WooPeace. You have found a way to get out of there and come here. That is all you need. The only reason creatures don't leave the WooPeace is they believe they can't. They allow an illusion to control them. Break the power of the illusion and you're out of there!"

Breister and Annie were excited. "You mean we're almost out of here? You mean it's not much further? You mean it's easy to get out of here?"

The Owl shook his head. "I didn't say it was easy. I only said that you knew the way out. The way out is to want to get out more than anything else and to use your mind to find the way. There are many, many ways out of the caves. But you have to look for them to find them. You want out and you're using your minds—that's the way out." The Owl turned around and began to walk off.

Breister and Annie followed. "No more clues, eh?" Breister asked hopefully.

"No more clues," the Owl replied. "But I will give you some food and some work to do while you figure out your next step. Come on to my place."

Breister and Annie followed the Owl, feeling dejected and angry. "I'd like to jump on him and stomp him!" Annie fumed. "He's got a lot of nerve!"

“Now, now, Annie, keep a lid on it. Stomping him won’t do any good. We’re in our own tombs remember? If we don’t get out of here, we’re dead beasts. At least we’re getting some help and encouragement from the old bird, even if he is a bit daft!” Annie, realizing Breister was right, subdued her anger into a sulking slow burn, which she kept to herself.

Breister moved up to climb over the rough rocks beside the Owl. “So, you must live down here, eh?” Breister asked, panting, as they climbed up through an intricate series of stalactites and stalagmites.

“No, I don’t live here,” the Owl replied. “I’ve got a little cabin in the woods. My art studio is down here, but I don’t live down here.” He gave Breister a whimsical look. “What do you think I am, daft?”

“You live outside?” Breister again felt a surge of joy and hope. “How far is it? Which way do we go?”

The Owl sighed, “You just don’t get it, do you?”

“What do you mean, I don’t get it?” Breister howled, almost giving in to angry frustration. Then, seeing that the Owl was neither walking nor speaking, Breister calmed down again. “O.K., you win. I get the picture. We know the way out of here and can find it on our own.” Breister realized that his anger and frustration were wasted on the Owl, who was not going to help them beyond what he had already promised to do.

“So,” Breister went on, “what’s this about Kinshy?”

The Owl brightened up as they continued to scramble through passages. “Kinshy is an ancient, long-unused language,” he related. “I grew up among the WooSheep—first as a Woonyak in the WooPeace, and then among the WooSheep at the Bottoms. But I got so tired of the two clans hating each other that I decided to live alone. I built a little cabin in the woods, where I study Kinshy, play Tosht with an Otter friend that lives nearby, and paint in my studio.”

“You play Tosht?” Breister exclaimed. “It’s my favorite game!”

“They don’t call me Toshty for nothing!” the Owl grinned. “My real name is Pitinemon Asphodetalus T. Billpip—you can see why I prefer to be called Toshty.” Breister agreed that he also preferred the nickname.

Turning and twisting over mineralized passages, climbing over a sea of fissures, and scrambling through seeming mountain ranges of stalactites and stalagmites, finally Toshty stopped and said, “Shoooo-moooo-loooo, fraggnob billmwee, troots!...Welcome to my studio, friends!”

They had entered a large chamber lit with small lamps that glowed rather than burned. “I use a special kind of coal in my lamps,” Toshty explained. “I treat lumps of coal with a mineral bath and they glow brightly, but give off almost no smoke. It protects my work.” As he

said this, he extended his wing to show off his work.

And what a work it was! Breister and Annie gazed in astonished admiration. Bears, Deer, Sheep, Cows, Badgers, Otters, Ducks...All kinds of creatures were powerfully and beautifully painted on the smooth walls of the chamber. It was gigantic and astonishingly beautiful. The painting went on and on and on. It was perhaps 100 feet long altogether, counting all the different patches of wall that were used.

"I've never seen anything so stunning! It's gargantuously magnificent!" Breister stammered.

"Yes, this is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!" Annie agreed.

"This is the entire history of the WooSheep," Toshty explained. "It's my story of the WooSheep from the beginning of time to the present. Way at that end you see I've painted the Ancient Ones. That's where we all came from, you know..." The Owl paused, gazing with contented eyes at his vast life's work. My art makes me happy. The WooSheep are fools to hate each other. They can be fools if they want, but I don't have to be. I have my art."

"Has anyone else seen your art, Toshty?" Breister asked. "Such a magnificent work ought to be seen by everyone, especially the WooSheep."

Toshty sighed. "No...No one else has seen it. Years ago, I tried to tell the WooSheep, both those at the Bottoms and at WooPeace, about my art and the story it tells. But those at WooPeace shunned me and the clan at the Bottoms treated me like a mental case. I finally just gave up and retreated to my cabin in the woods. Shweng, my Otter friend, would come, but he's blind."

"Shweng plays Tosht, and he's blind?" Breister asked. "Tosht is a very visual game. How in the world does he play if he's blind?"

"Shweng has very good sight in his heart," Toshty replied. "He knows he can trust me, so he tells me how he thinks about his Tosht moves and I make them for him. He usually beats me soundly!" Toshty concluded with a smile. "It's not about winning or losing, it's about friendship. That's also the way I am with him about my art. I tell him what I'm doing in my studio and he sees it in his heart. He often has good suggestions."

"Well," Toshty continued, "as they say in Kinshy: Snethboodt matav lis mavert trooven! Roughly translated, that means, 'Let's eat!'—here, have some eggs and honeycomb." Toshty reached into a crevice in the rock and pulled out two pots. One was filled with raw honeycomb and the other had many small blue-green speckled eggs.

"So, go ahead and eat," Toshty directed. "It is all fresh. I gathered the honey and eggs just today. There are many places where bees have hives and small birds make their nests." Toshty smeared an egg with

honeycomb and popped it into his mouth.

Annie and Breister looked at Toshty doubtfully. “Er, uh, Toshty,” Annie began, “you eat these things raw? Shell and all?” Breister felt less hungry than he had a few moments before.

“Surely do! And it’s a top of the day meal, too, I’ll be warning you! Now, you just go ahead and smear some honeycomb on an egg and pop it in your mouth! It’s delicious!” Toshty was not bashful about showing what he meant. He polished off a half dozen eggs in a short time.

Seeing that Breister and Annie still hesitated, Toshty commented, “You’re letting your old way of seeing things blind you to a new reality, my friends. Let go of the old way of thinking and you’ll be surprised at what you can see.”

Breister looked solemnly at Toshty. “So, this is a ‘top of the day meal,’ eh,” he chuckled. “Well, here goes the ‘new way of seeing things!’” Smearing an egg with honeycomb, Breister closed his eyes, slightly grimaced, and popped the strange food in his mouth. Crunching the egg slowly, a smile spread across his face and his eyes opened wide.

“That is marvelous! It’s truly delicious!” Breister burst out. “Why, who would have believed it? It’s entirely different than I expected.”

Seeing Breister’s reaction, Annie tried one too. She also was enthusiastic about the new food. “Why, it’s...well, it’s...sweet in a spicy sort of way...or spicy in a crunchy, saucy sort of way...or, well, I don’t exactly know how to describe it, but I like it!”

In a short time, the three polished off almost the entire stock of honeycomb and eggs. Toshty did not seem concerned. “I’ll be gathering some more tomorrow, not to worry,” he assured his friends when they noticed the provisions were gone.

“I’m hoping that you’ll spend a few days gathering honeycomb and eggs with me,” Toshty said. “It’s hard and dangerous work. The bees don’t like to be disturbed and the birds are small and nest in the most difficult to reach places. One has to climb to some very precarious places. But, as you can see, it’s worth it!”

Breister had been thoughtful for several minutes. Then he said, “Toshty, I have a question. If there are bees and birds, that might mean that they come and go from the cave. Is that what it means? Do the bees and birds come and go?”

Toshty gazed at Breister with a warm and friendly look. “I’m proud of you, Breister. You are using your mind, my friend. You’re right. The bees and birds do come and go, but not in the way you think. To protect themselves, they use only the smallest openings in the rock. None are large enough for any of us. That is not a way out, as you are perhaps thinking.”

Breister sighed and settled down with his head resting on his arms. Toshty could see that he was not discouraged, but thinking. “Breister,” Toshty said, “just because you were wrong about following the bees and birds out doesn’t mean they can’t help you find the way. It just takes...”

Before Toshty could finish, Breister completed the thought, “It just takes a new way of seeing.”

Toshty smiled at Breister. “Yes, my friend, yes...”

The next morning, Toshty announced that he was going on a several day journey to gather honeycomb and cave bird eggs. “You are invited to come with me, if you would like, but I can do it by myself if you wish to do something else.” He looked at Breister and Annie with a loving smile. “I really do understand if you have something more important to do—don’t mind me.”

Breister looked at his feet and shuffled from foot to foot, as if getting ready to say something difficult. “Well, Toshty, I really want to get out of here. I want to search for a way out of here. I’d love to help you climb around to all sorts of incredibly dangerous places where I could easily fall to my death, but I really want to get out of here...Which is exactly why I’ve decided to come with you! Somehow, I’ve learned a lot from you since yesterday...” Breister paused and looked at Annie. “I don’t know what this mangy Cougar wants to do, but speaking for myself, I think I’d love to learn how to risk my life to get some more of that delicious honeycomb and eggs!...I feel like helping you is the least I can do, even if it delays me a few days in getting out of here. There’s always time to help out a friend. Like you’ve been saying, it just takes a new way of seeing things.”

“Count me in, too,” Annie added. “I can’t wait to see how agile a big, pot-bellied Wood Cow is climbing after bees and itsy-bitsy bird eggs! It should be a hoot to watch!...And besides, I like you, Toshty...You are, without a doubt, one of the weirdest birds I’ve ever met, but I like you. It’s a new way of looking at things, I guess.”

“Well, my friends, let’s go get the bladder-canoe and be on our way,” Toshty said. Breister and Annie looked puzzled.

“Oh, yes,” he told his surprised friends, “we will definitely need my bladder-canoe. The bees and birds are found all along the Deep Springs River, which runs from here straight down into the Rounds of Deep Springs. It’s the fastest way out of here. We’ll stop along the way and gather honeycomb and eggs enough to fill the canoe. When we get to the Rounds, I’ll trade some for artist paints, other supplies, and a ride on a running-wagon back to the Drownlands Cutoff, then I either go to my cabin for a while, or come back to the studio.”

“Bladder-canoe?” Annie repeated dubiously.

“It’s an inflatable canoe,” Toshty explained. The one bad thing

about the Deep Springs River is that it runs too fast to paddle against, so you can only ride it one way. So, I ride my bladder-canoe down to the Rounds, then deflate it so it's easier to carry back. When I get to the Drownlands Cutoff, I reinflate it and paddle to my cabin. My cabin is near the place where there's an entrance to the cave system that leads to the Deep Springs River. I stay at my cabin as long as I like, then I ride the river back to my studio, gathering some more honeycomb and eggs along the way to eat while I'm at my studio. When I'm ready to leave my studio, I complete the circuit again."

"Mighty thunder!" Breister exclaimed. "That's more than I would have ever dreamed when you invited me to help you collect a little honeycomb and some eggs! That is some system. 'Seeing in a new way' has taken on a whole different meaning! We're getting out of here!"

"Works for me," Toshty grinned.

# Sailing the Ocean of Dreams

Toshty led Breister and Annie through a series of chambers in the cave system. Leading the way with a fish-oil lantern, the eccentric Owl showed them that the path they were traveling was well-worn. “I’ve made this trip dozens of times,” he assured them. “It’s easy as pie. Just a few things to know, a few things to do, and few things to avoid, and we’ll be in the Rounds!”

“So, what’s to know?” Breister asked suspiciously, sensing that Toshty wasn’t saying everything he knew.

“Well, the first thing to know,” Toshty said, with a shake of his head, “is that the Deep Springs River is also known as the ‘River of No Return.’” Seeing the startled faces of his friends, he quickly followed with, “No, it’s not what you think. It’s called the ‘River of No Return’ because, like I told you, we can only go one way on it.”

“Uh, thanks for the reassurance, Toshty,” Annie said. “But if that rumble I hear is where we’re going, my stomach is already queasy!”

“Yes, that’s it.” Toshty replied, stopping and sitting down on his pack. “We’ll stop here for a few minutes and rest. Enjoy the freedom to stretch. It’ll be your last chance for a while.” Breister and Annie gave Toshty uncertain looks. What was this crazy old Owl getting them into, they wondered?

“I need to tell you here what to do when we reach the river, while we can still talk,” Toshty continued. “Once we get near the river, hand signals will be our only way to communicate.”

Reaching into a pocket in his pack, Toshty pulled out some small balls of cotton mixed with pine sap. “Here’s a pair of earplugs for each of you,” he said. “First instruction is always to wear them,” Toshty explained, showing them how to mold the earplugs to fit securely in their ears.

Breister and Annie could already see how necessary the earplugs would be. In the closed caverns, the roar of the river would soon become deafening as they advanced towards it.

Toshty’s instructions to Breister and Annie hinted at what lay ahead. “The Deep Springs River is like a maddened beast,” he began, “it surges and plunges through a tube-like channel through the rock. Riding in a canoe, we are completely unable to resist the power of the river, or control our ride. All we can do is wait it out.” He paused,

looking with a slight hint of bemusement at his friends.

"Now, now, I know that sounds terrifying and you wonder why anyone would take such a ride," he continued. "Over the eons the surging water has worn and smoothed the walls of the channel to a glass-like smoothness. It's like being blown through a reed!" He could see that the fears of his friends were not being soothed by his explanation, but he went on with his instructions nevertheless. Breister and Annie listened with apprehensive interest.

"We'll inflate the canoe when we get to the river," Toshty directed. "Then we lie down in the bottom, one after another, with the heaviest beast in the middle." He poked Breister in his considerable belly playfully, indicating that would be his place.

Grinning at his friends, he continued, "Except for the stomach-turning twists and turns, and the 'scream-like-you're-going-to-die' plunge through complete darkness, it's just like being blown through a hollow reed."

Breister and Annie looked at Toshty darkly. "Don't worry, friends," Toshty assured them, "I've done it dozens of times."

"When we board the canoe, lie face up," Toshty grinned, obviously understanding his friends' discomfort. "You'll have to raise your head to breathe sometimes because there'll be water in the bottom of the canoe. You won't need light to see anything, because your eyes will be closed as tight as you can get them! It's an absolutely terrifying ride...But when it's over, you'll think it was great fun!"

"Yeah," Breister muttered, "when it's over!"

"Toshty," Annie asked, looking worried, "you mean we just lie there on our backs, zooming along in the dark, with no way to control our ride or see what's coming?"

"Good question, easy answer!" Toshty replied. "You are exactly right! No paddling is possible. In fact, the worst thing you could do is sit up and imbalance the canoe. Remember it's like being blown through a hollow reed," he laughed. "Just lie back and enjoy the fun!"

Breister felt his stomach beginning to churn. He was not looking forward to this. "How do we collect honey and eggs going along like that?" he asked. "You said we'd collect more during our trip?"

"After about a day's ride, zinging along without a stop," Toshty answered, "we'll reach a place called the 'Ocean of Dreams.' It's a huge underground lake where the fast part of the river ends. The Ocean of Dreams has lots of fantastic rock formations all around it, and it's fractured with many cracks that reach the surface. We'll find lots of honey and cave bird eggs there."

"Why is it called the Ocean of Dreams?" Annie asked.

"Just imagine a place with rock formations so fantastic that, if you can dream it, you can see a rock formation that resembles it! You

won't believe it until you see it. One day, you could have a pleasant dream or a frightening nightmare, and find its image in the Ocean of Dreams." He nodded his head knowingly. "You won't believe it!" he repeated.

"So, after the Ocean of Dreams, what happens?" Breister asked.

"We pick one of the streams flowing out of it and go on to the Rounds," Toshty replied. "The river will be much calmer then and we can paddle normally the rest of the way."

"One of the streams?" Annie asked.

"Yes," Toshty replied, "there are dozens of outlets from the Ocean of Dreams...you have to know which one you want."

"Where do the others go?" Breister said.

"I don't know where they all go," Toshty answered. "I really only know the one that goes to the Rounds. I know that one also goes to the Estates of the Norder Wolves, but I don't know which one. I just know the Norder Wolves maintain a sentry patrol boat on the Ocean of Dreams. They don't like outsiders and want to keep creatures away from the route to their Estates."

"I've heard of them," Annie observed. "They're fierce warriors. I've encountered their soldiers. They have legions stationed throughout the northern foothills of the Don'ot Stumb Mountains. You can't move in that area without running into their scouts and picket lines. They're a fearsome lot. No enemy would dare mess with their Battle Stallions and Club Wolves," she concluded.

"What are they afraid of?" Breister asked. "There's never been war that I've ever heard of," he continued. "Who needs Battle Stallions and Club Wolves?" He looked at Annie. "There are some pesky bandits around that do some raiding and plundering, but you don't need an army for that."

"I hear rumors that we don't see the half of it," Toshty replied. "No one knows much about the Norder Wolves. They keep to themselves. But I hear stories that we only see the ranks of their army in training down this way. They use the peaceable frontier to train new recruits for their legions. It's a mystery why they need an army. When I come through the Ocean of Dreams I just avoid messing with their sentry boat. That's all I want, or need, to know about the Norder Wolves. If you know how to handle the sentries, you'll be O.K. You don't make them suspicious and they won't bother you. They aren't aggressive, but they are nasty as can be if they think you're trying to enter their lands."

"OK..." Breister said slowly. "So we just say, 'Hello, and Good Day,' to the nice little Club Wolves and go on, huh?"

"Oh, no," Toshty said seriously, "we want to answer them precisely. There's a certain pattern of response they expect. If you

don't know the words they want to hear, they know you're a stranger. That makes them instantly suspicious. When we run into a sentry, let me do all the talking." The Norder Wolf commander in the Ocean of Dreams is a Colonel Snart—he's nicknamed 'Scream-seller Snart' because they say he's got a sideline in smuggling and slaving. If we encounter a Norder Wolf patrol boat, say nothing and let me handle it. Hope they won't take us to Commander Snart. If we go to him, no one will see us again. We'll be sold as slaves and that will be the end of us."

"Well, thanks, Toshty," Annie said, with a wry smile, "you've invited us on such a pleasant little voyage!"

"Oh, don't mention it," Toshty replied. "I've made this trip dozens of times. It's not bad if you know the way." Breister and Annie shook their heads, hoping that this crazy old Owl did, indeed, know the way.

"Here," Toshty said, offering the remaining honeycomb and cave bird eggs. "This is the last chance we have to eat until the Ocean of Dreams. The ride is too wild for eating until then."

Breister and Annie both declined. "I have a feeling that a full stomach wouldn't be full very long on this trip," Breister grinned.

"I think I'll fast, thanks." Annie agreed.

"Well, O.K.," Toshty responded. "If you insist, I'll be glad to eat your provisions!" He stuffed his mouth happily, smearing honey and egg yolk all over his cheeks in his gleeful snacking. "You'll feel more like eating next trip," Toshty said, as if such a promise would make his friends happier.

"One trip at a time, Toshty," Annie replied. "One trip at a time."

When Toshty had finished eating, the three friends walked the rest of the way to the ledge overlooking the river. They unrolled the bladder-canoe and took turns blowing to inflate it for use. Then they securely stowed all their gear, tying it down in well oiled satchels to keep things dry. Toshty connected the launch rope to a special pulley he had rigged up, directing his friends to put in their earplugs and position themselves in the boat.

"Here we go!" Toshty signaled, beginning to pull on the rope. Pulling together, the canoe inched toward the edge of the ledge. One pull. Two pulls. Three pulls. On the seventh pull, the boat fell free of the ledge and plummeted 20 or 30 feet to the river below. SPLOOOSH! ZING! They were off!

Breister and Annie, despite their earlier adventures and courageous natures, battled against panic. The river roared in their ears, and the earplugs were nearly useless. Gradually, however, their panic subsided. Although the canoe plunged and bucked with dizzying motion, they soon realized that the canoe would not capsize. The surging river carried them down the perfectly smooth rock tube, with

a surprisingly small amount of water sloshing in the bottom of the canoe.

Hours passed and exhaustion eventually overwhelmed panic and excitement. Breister and Annie fell into fitful sleep, unable to completely forget their troubles and fears. Toshty slept like a baby.

At last, Toshty's voice called to them, as if out of some hazy distant place in their dreams. "Wake up, you landlubbers! It's time to sail on the Ocean of Dreams!"

The raging river had now flowed into a large, calmer body of water. The three friends sat up. Toshty unpacked the fish-oil lanterns and lit them. He directed Annie to light another and, in the warm glow of both lamps, they could see their surroundings somewhat.

Fantastic rock formations rose all around them. The light of their lanterns illumined the shapes, making them cast weird flickering shadows. The lake actually flowed around the rocks as if there was a fantastic range of mountains rising from the lake. Paddling skillfully, Toshty piloted the canoe in and out around the formations. How he knew the way, Breister could not guess. Breister was astonished that some of the forms looked exactly like dreams he remembered from his periods of sleep coming down the river, and even far in his past.

"These are the dreams and nightmares of my life!" Breister gasped, looking at Annie. She was turning her head slowly, looking around at the rocks. Her face showed a mixture of emotions: surprise, uncertainty, awe, fear. Breister recognized the same feelings in himself. A particular formation and its shadows would seem similar to a dream Breister had once had, and that memory would trigger new images among other shapes and shadows. It was a strangely beautiful and wonderful experience, but at the same time unsettling.

"The more I see, the more I think I see!" Annie said. "It's as if shapes and shadows trigger memories of dreams, and memories make me think I see more images!"

"And dream follows dream," Breister replied in amazement. "It's as if we're moving in a dreamworld where the real and the unreal play with each other..."

As they paddled along in their surreal surroundings, here and there small painted boards were stuck up on the rocks to give directions. Some signs were warnings: "NO PASSAGE WELCOMED!" Toshty explained that these were posted by the Norder Wolves to warn the curious and lost away.

Paddling through the Ocean of Dreams, gradually the rumble of the river was left behind and the eerie stillness of the great underground returned. They heard few sounds except the periodic sound of cave birds flitting about somewhere in the darkness and the soft splash of their paddles, until a voice called out: "Hullo, my frippers! What's the

lark?"

Toshty, instantly alert, answered the inquiry, addressing a large Wolf wearing a heavy leather and iron uniform. The Wolf was floating nearby in a rowboat. "Stay there, friend," he replied, "we are friendly frippers taking a lark to the Rounds. No cargo, no weapons, no money."

The Wolf, armed with an immense club, had a snub-nosed, flat-browed face that made him look dangerous. But he also had a strangely friendly manner about him. His ill-fitting uniform, and small red eyes peering through spectacles, made him seem more interesting than threatening. A leather helmet, perched precariously on his head, and tilting so badly over his left ear that it threatened to fall off at any moment, only added to this effect.

"Hullo, my frippers! What's for grubstake?"

"No eggs, no honey, no dried fish," Toshty replied. He obviously knew the routine.

"Hullo, my frippers! What's the game?" the Wolf asked.

Toshty replied once again, this time with a strange look of steely courage in his eye, "No stopping, no more questions, no more answers."

The Wolf scowled at the three friends, staring at them over the top of his spectacles. After a long moment, during which Breister and Annie sensed a tense nervousness in Toshty, the Wolf said: "Forget the way, frippers! Stay away!"

Toshty, letting out a slow breath of relief, began paddling again, guiding the canoe near the Wolf's rowboat. Reaching in his pocket he pulled out a small package and tossed it to the Wolf. "I forget your face, I forget the place, nevermore to talk of it!" he called out to the Wolf as they passed on in the direction they had been going.

"What was that all about?" Annie asked quietly when she thought they had paddled far enough to be out of the Wolf's hearing.

"The sentries always ask the same questions," Toshty replied. "If you don't know the answers they expect, they will haul you in to see Colonel Snart. If they're in a good mood and you give the right answers, they let you pass. We were lucky that time. It was a new recruit. The young ones are lonely. It's usually their first time away from home. And they're assigned to one of the most lonely, forsaken posts imaginable. If they let you pass, you have to promise them that you won't tell anyone they let you by. I gave him a pack of pine sap gum. It helps. He'll tell the other sentries. They get to know me and let me pass. But it's always a little tense when I meet a new sentry for the first time. There are some bad ones."

"You go through this on every trip down the river?" Breister asked in admiration of Toshty's courage.

"Yes."

"Ever feel frightened?"

"I suppose if I thought about it—which I don't." Toshty said with a grin. Then he turned serious. "But I don't take it lightly, either. It's no joke. You get the wrong sentry and all the pine sap gum in the world won't save you. They'll have you in chains and hanging by your feet before Scream-seller Snart so fast your head will swim."

"It really puzzles me why the Norder Wolves would assign a mental case as commander down here," Annie said. "I just don't get it. He sounds like a bandit."

"Oh, no," Toshty replied. "Scream-seller Snart makes your average run-of-the-mill thug look like a garden club member. But that's why they want him here. He scares everybody off. He's 'solid gold' security-wise, and..."

"And what?" Breister asked.

"And if everyone is afraid to go near Colonel Snart's zone, he gets to run his smuggling and slave trade, no questions asked."

"How do you know about that?" Annie said.

"I hear things. I see things. I hear that he's in league with some beasts in the Hedgelands. Creatures disappear up there sometimes, don't they?" he asked, looking at Breister.

"Yes," Breister replied slowly as his mind raced. New images crowded into his sight among the rocks and shadows. Terrifying images of a Wood Cow family in chains...Their house a shambles..."By the Ancient Ones!" Breister exclaimed.

"What?" Annie said, looking at him.

"I'm seeing images in the formations," Breister breathed softly. "Images of our family being driven from our home by slavers. Helga does not remember what happened exactly, but somehow we were separated and she and my wife escaped. We don't know what happened to my wife. Helga told me she has nightmares sometimes, but she does not remember everything that happened."

The friends were silent for a time.

"Toshty," Breister began. His face was drawn with sadness in the flickering light.

Toshty looked at him sympathetically. "Yes?"

Breister continued in a soft voice. "There was a dispute between me and an official. One night, ten years ago, slavers attacked our house. We were loaded on boats and taken down a river. We tried to escape and the boat capsized. I escaped, but could not find Helga and Helbara in the chaos. Later, Helga reached freedom and was rescued by some Roundies. That's all we know."

"So, perhaps there is a connection between that experience and the Norder Wolves; is that your point?" Annie whispered.

“I don’t know,” Breister replied. “I don’t know. I just wonder why I seem to have such a strange feeling about the images I see in the rocks and shadows, that’s all.”

“Well, anytime you deal with someone named Scream-seller Snart, it’s going to feel strange!” Annie replied with a grimace. “Maybe there’s nothing more to it than that.”

“Yes, maybe so,” Breister agreed. “Maybe so…”

# Close on the Trail

Helga, as a young beast, had always been tall for her age and strongly-muscled. From her earliest years, her Wood Cow heritage had shown itself in her talents and interests. She worked for a master carpenter, Alao Barkword, during her years in the Rounds and won his admiration with her skill. Always overflowing with opinions, Alao would often loudly compare his apprentice to the legendary Ragebark, known all over as the best carpenter that ever lived in the Rounds. “I knew Ragebark,” Alao boasted, “he was no Helga—she is the best carpenter Cow that ever lived—and she’s only a youngster! What will she be when she is full-grown? It will be something to see, that you’ll be sure!” Standing at full height in her pounded barkskins, boots, wide-brimmed hat, and carpenter’s apron, Helga, even at age twelve, towered over most other creatures in the Rounds community. Her huge forearms rippled with the strength needed to lift and carry timbers.

After completing her apprenticeship, the world seemed to be hers for the asking. Smart, strong, and talented, Helga hoped to find her fortune and make her mark. Just past her twelth birthday, Helga joined a running wagon team to provide some service to the Rounds while she decided what path she would next take into her future. Things did not go as she planned, however, and circumstances that, at first, seemed disasterous to her future happiness intervened to force her to leave the Rounds. What seemed fatal to her future, however, because of her courage and confidence in herself, ultimately resulted in her being reunited with her family at O’Fallon’s Bluff. Her confidence in the face of disaster created a future she could not have dreamed possible.

Now, as she listened to JanWoo-Corriboo recount the story of the WooSheep, Helga recognized this same spirit in her new friend. She admired the energetic strength, fierce self-confidence, and snappy smartness she saw. How many of the emotions she had felt when she completed her apprenticeship and went with the wagon runners now came alive in JanWoo-Corriboo. She loved to listen to her, to watch the pulsating rhythm that moved her so constantly that she seemed never to be still. How much she admired her.

How much Helga knew she needed JanWoo-Corriboo in this, the

greatest challenge of her life. Her once powerful legs were weak from injuries. She hobbled along with the aid of a walking stick. She had lost both her Mamma and Papa. Would she be alone for the rest of her life? It almost seemed to be too much to bear. Where had the happy times gone? Where was her father? Helga, feeling herself sinking into a slough of self-pity and despair, closed her eyes to force back the tears that were gathering.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" JanWoo-Corriboo asked, interrupting Helga's reflections. "We can be at the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still' by dark if we want. It's a great place to visit at night." She looked mysteriously at her friends. "Night is the best time to visit if you really want to understand the place," she said excitedly. "That's when the Venom Bats are most active!"

"Ohhhh...Great!" Burwell shuddered. "I can't wait to feel what it's like to have a Venom Bat sink its teeth in me! Yep! Yep! Yep!"

"Don't worry, Burwell," JanWoo-Corriboo advised. "Venom Bats are so tiny you won't even see them coming! They just sort of fly into your ears. You hear a little flutter, they zip in your ear, and bore into your brain. You die so quick, you won't feel a thing."

Burwell, Bwellina and Helga all looked at JanWoo-Corriboo to see if she was serious. They couldn't tell. She just stared at them with a look that said, 'Yes, that's what I said.'

"Well, O.K.," Helga said at last. "There's worse things than Venom Bats biting me on the brain. I want to find Papa. Let's get going."

"Here," JanWoo-Corriboo said, handing Burwell a pack. "This will be enough provisions for an overnight. We can come back tomorrow and fill up again if we need more."

"The 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still' is that close?" Helga asked with some surprise.

"Oh, yes," JanWoo-Corriboo replied. "It is very close. But sometimes, close is far away," she added. Helga thought that she noticed a hint of sadness in her voice.

Picking up the pack, Burwell settled it comfortably on his shoulders. Helga picked up her pack. JanWoo-Corriboo and Bwellina both slung water jugs across their shoulders. Looking delighted with her charges, JanWoo-Corriboo raised her arm and pointed toward a jagged gap between some hills in the Bone Forest. "Forward, ho! That's where we're going—the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still'—but don't tell anyone I told you that," she grinned.

They walked several hours heading back into the dry, barren lands of the Bone Forest, but not in the same direction as Helga and her friends had traveled before. Moving deeper into an ever more barren and forbidding terrain, at first they made slow progress. The bones of the Ancient Ones were everywhere and JanWoo-Corriboo delighted in

telling about the fossils. Burwell loved to hear JanWoo-Corriboo rattle off the names of the Ancient Ones.

"She's fantastic," Burwell exulted. "Show her a leg bone and she says, Tyrannosaurus! Show her another bone and she says Pterosaur! She's amazing! Yep! Yep! Yep!"

Helga wanted to keep moving, but she tried to be patient. "Don't worry, Helga," JanWoo-Corriboo said at last. "I know you want to get there. We've got plenty of time. The 'Mountain That Moves' doesn't really go anywhere," she added with a friendly smile.

As the afternoon was waning, they entered the jagged gorge that JanWoo-Corriboo had pointed out as they left the Bottoms. It was a ghastly place. The barren hills suddenly stopped in a ragged edge, as if torn off by some giant hand. An old, extinct volcano crater yawned open before them. The crater sloped steeply down to unknown depths below. Along one side, where the crater had collapsed in an ancient eruption, the ground was more level. Here and there steam rose from hot springs. The pungent smell of sulphur wafted strongly.

"Welcome to the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still,'" JanWoo-Corriboo announced.

Burwell shuddered. "Where are the Venom Bats?" he said in a quavering voice.

"They come out at dusk," JanWoo-Corriboo said. "We've got some time before that. We'll want to be in just the right place to see them. Come on. We'll move down to where the best seats are!"

"Ohhh...Thanks, you're a real friend," Burwell sighed.

"You'll like it, I promise," JanWoo-Corriboo replied. "You won't believe how cool it is."

"My heart is just leaping with excitement!" Burwell observed sourly.

"Well, in any case," JanWoo-Corriboo said, "we've got to get moving. Father will be waiting for me."

Helga and her friends were thunderstruck. They stared at JanWoo-Corriboo with saucer eyes. "Your father?" they exclaimed together.

"What is your father doing in a place like this?"

"Shhh..." JanWoo-Corriboo scolded playfully. "This is a secret. I'm taking a big risk in even bringing you to the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still' in the first place. If anyone finds out I meet my father here, I'll be dead meat."

"Ohhh...Don't say 'dead meat' around me," Burwell said. "I keep thinking I hear Venom Bats fluttering around my head already! Yep! Yep! Yep!"

JanWoo-Corriboo related her story. "I was born in the WooPeace," she began, "my parents were Woonyaks. Mother became committed to the WooPeace. Father never liked the place but did not wish to leave

Mother behind. Neither of them wanted me to stay in the WooPeace my entire life. 'Do you want to stay in the WooPeace when you grow up?' I remember my mother asking me many times when I was a young beast. The answer I was always supposed to give was, 'Oh, no, ma'am.' Mother herself did not know how to leave—or did not want to leave—but she wanted her daughter to have a life in the world above. So, from the time I was a small child, she would take me exploring. She never told the others in the WooPeace what she was doing. It was always just, 'Oh, we're just catching salamanders for our dinner,' and such stuff. But what we were doing was looking for a way out...and we found one."

"Whew..." Helga whistled. "Do you mean that your parents are still down there?"

"Yes," JanWoo-Corriboo replied with a tone of sadness in her voice. "I have not seen Mother since I left. It is too dangerous for her to be too obvious about knowing where an exit is. But she brings Father every eight days. I meet him and help him take a bath in the hot mineral springs. He was injured when they fell into the caves. He's crippled and can't walk very well. But the hot mineral spring seems to help him. He's getting better, I think."

"Doesn't anyone follow him?" Bwellina asked. "Doesn't anyone get suspicious?"

"Oh, I imagine some in the WooPeace know. But so long as you aren't obvious and don't try to tell others and convince them to go with you, no one will bother you. It's the fact that most people can't live knowing they could leave. They're scared of knowing. Most people won't even try to follow Mother when she brings Father here, even if they know what she's doing. Only if the WooZan sees her as a threat to WooPeace would there be trouble. Mother doesn't want trouble. She's very discreet."

Helga's head was ready to burst. It was absurd. These WooSheep were all stark raving mad! She wanted to scream: "Why don't you all just...just...well, why don't you just...Fix it! This is nuts!" Despite Helga's well-intentioned desire not to be critical, the last three words slipped out.

JanWoo-Corriboo smiled. "Yes, it is nuts, Helga. But I don't know how to fix it. Do you?"

Helga was silent. She had to admit that she really didn't know how to fix it. But that didn't mean there was not a way.

"No," Helga said quietly, "I don't know how to fix it. But I think I'll go nuts if I really have to admit there is no way to change things. So, I'm not admitting that...Not yet at least. I'm a stubborn old Wood Cow in some ways. Mostly I just won't admit that I'm too stupid to solve a problem until it has completely whipped me. I just heard of

this, so I don't feel whipped yet."

JanWoo-Corriboo grinned at Helga. "You know," the young Fox said, "you remind me of me in some ways."

"Come on, we've got to hurry," she urged. "Father will be waiting."

The friends climbed down the slope to a bubbling hot spring. A male Fox, with a checkered bandana tied over his head, and a matching shirt, was sitting on the side of the pool, soaking his legs in the hot water.

JanWoo-Corriboo ran to him and threw her arms around him. "Father, it is so good to see you!"

"And you, too, my Janty," the older Fox smiled. "You have some new friends, I see."

Introductions were made all around. "This is my Father, TatterWoo-Corriboo," said Janty, as her friends now knew her. "You can call him 'Tatty' if you want," she said. "That's what he's called around the WooPeace."

Helga sat down and pulled off her boots. Her legs hurt. She began rubbing her legs as she always did at the end of the day. It helped to relax the muscles and bring relief from the pain of her injured limbs.

"You should try the hot mineral water bath," Tatty invited. "You'll be surprised how good it feels, and how much it helps."

She accepted the advice gratefully. Rolling up her pants, she slipped her legs in the hot, bubbling water.

"Ahhh, this is just what the doctor ordered," Helga grinned. "I never want to leave!"

"Sorry, friend," Tatty responded, "twenty minute maximum. You'll be baked like a potato if you stay longer."

Helga looked crestfallen, then brightened. "I'll take my twenty minutes; maybe Venom Bats don't like water." She nudged Burwell playfully.

JanWoo-Corriboo piped up, "That's right, Burwell, the sun is going down. Won't be long until the Venom Bats come out."

"Oh, Janty, for heaven's sake, not that old monster tale again!" Tatty laughed. "Don't listen to her, Burwell, she's just teasing you. There's no such thing as Venom Bats."

"What?" Burwell burst out. "No Venom Bats? Do you mean to tell me that this pirate pup has given me heart palpitations for nothing? She's been fibbing to us? Why, I'll throw you in the hot spring and hold you under! Yep! Yep! Yep!" He started after Janty in a mock rage.

"Yes, Burwell, she fibbed, but it's the biggest fib in these parts, since every WooSheep believes it's true!" TatterWoo-Corriboo chuckled. "No one knows where the myth about the Venom Bats got started, but every WooSheep in the Bottoms learns it as a fact of life.

Little beasts cut their teeth on the Venom Bat tale. The whole clan is terrified of them."

"Uh, excuse me," Burwell said, "but the two of you say there's no such thing as Venom Bats and every other creature says there is. We're supposed to believe you two? Sounds like bad odds to me!"

"Oh, there's bats all right," Janty spoke up. "We'll be seeing them real soon. And the sight may scare the daylights out of you—but they're not dangerous. I don't know whether someone got scared of them once and the story just grew and grew, or if someone made up the story to keep the WooSheep away from here, but you don't have to be afraid. Just take a look—here they come!"

JanWoo-Corriboo pointed to a vast cloud of small bats that was pouring out of an opening in the rock not far away. There were so many that they completely blocked out the disk of the setting sun. "Why, there must be thousands and thousands!" Helga breathed.

"Yes," Janty replied. "You can definitely see how, if you were a little skitterish about bats, the sight could give you the shakes!" She looked at Burwell, who was noticeably shivering at the sight. "Don't be scared, Burwell," she continued. "These bats only eat flies and bugs."

"Well, that still makes them meat-eaters!" Burwell argued. Everyone laughed.

"So," Helga asked, "why don't you tell everyone that the bats are harmless? Why allow the myth to continue?"

"Oh, some of the WooSheep know the truth," Janty responded, "or at least would consider the possibility. But most just won't even listen to such an idea. They know that if there's no Venom Bats, then there might be a lot of other things that aren't true, too..."

"Like what?" Bwellina asked.

"Like the idea that the WooSheep who live in the caves are bad, evil beasts," Janty answered, looking fondly at her father.

Helga couldn't take it any longer. "What a bunch of crazy, absolutely stupid, idiots!" she exploded. "This is nuts! We've got to do something! I can't stand it anymore!" She stopped, feeling frustrated and flustered. She wanted to do something, but she didn't know what.

Then, too, she also desperately wanted to find her father. Was she even close to his trail? There was only one possible—but unconfirmed—report of him. She was going on pure hope. She might be wasting her time. Had he really come this way? No one had reported seeing him. It was very discouraging.

"Whoa, Helga!" Janty exclaimed. "You sound just like Toshty when he goes off raving about the WooSheep."

"Toshty? Who's that?" Helga asked.

"Oh, he's my art teacher," JanWoo-Corriboo replied. "He's a

WooSheep who has lived at both the WooPeace and the Bottoms and couldn't handle living in either place. So he stays away from both places. He thinks the way the WooSheep clans don't acknowledge each other's existence is nuts, just like you do. He's kind of calmed down recently—just kind of retreated into his art—but he would really agree with you. He's a fantastic artist and he's teaching me and a few Otters how to paint."

"Well," Helga sighed, "I'd like to meet him someday. It would be refreshing to meet a WooSheep that has some sense! Oops!" She looked at Janty and Tatty. "I mean excepting you two, of course!" Janty and Tatty grinned at her.

"Well, we forgive the insult," Tatty chuckled. "But, it does hit a little too close to home. The truth of what you say is pretty depressing." He looked lovingly at Janty. "My wife and I wanted Janty to have a better life. Even though Janty's mother really loves the WooPeace and, in a way, I like it too, we knew that Janty had more energy and talent than the WooPeace could absorb. We have a good life in the WooPeace...Terrific friends, a comfortable life, a sense of peace. But it's not for everyone..." His voice trailed off. "It's just very lonely sometimes," he continued, reaching out for Janty's hand. "We really miss Janty."

"I know what you mean," Helga replied softly. "I miss my father terribly, too."

"What happened to your father?" TatterWoo-Corriboo asked.

"He's a Woonyak!" Janty interjected. "He's down in the WooPeace somewhere!"

Helga looked at JanWoo-Corriboo. "What did you say, Janty?" she asked, looking intently at the young Fox. "You think Papa fell into the WooPeace?" The idea had never before occurred to her.

"Sure!" Janty replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "From what you've said, it all points to Breister being a Woonyak. Why in the world would someone see him at the Drownlands Cutoff saying he had been at the Bone Forest and was heading to the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still'? It makes no sense, unless somehow he got mixed up with the WooPeace someway. No one has seen a Wood Cow at WooSheep Bottoms, and the WooSheep are the only ones who know where the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still' is. If Breister had been at the Bone Forest and was heading back to the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still,' it really can mean only one thing: He was a Woonyak and fell into the WooPeace. He found a way out and for some reason is coming back."

Helga grabbed Janty and hugged her tightly. "Oh, Janty, Janty! What a good friend you are! I never would have thought of such a thing. Why didn't you mention it before now?"

Janty, nearly smothered by Helga's massive arms, gasped out, "I didn't want to get your hopes up until we could ask Father if he'd seen a Wood Cow in the WooPeace...Have you seen a Wood Cow Woonyak, Father?"

They all looked at Tatty. "Yes," he replied with a smile. "We've had two Woonyaks lately—a Wood Cow and a Cougar. WooZan, our Chief, has been introducing them to life in the WooPeace. Most Woonyaks join the WooPeace eventually...unless they find a way out."

"Breister was seen at the Drownlands Cutoff!" Burwell observed excitedly. "He must have escaped!"

"Perhaps," TatterWoo-Corriboo replied, "but the odds are against it. It's not easy to get out of the cave system. Most Woonyaks can't do it. I have not seen the new Woonyaks lately, but that is not unusual in the WooPeace. Some of the beasts live in different caves in the system. Even on nights of the Common Bowl there are so many beasts, I don't see everyone. They may be there and I just haven't met them."

"Yes, that's true," Helga agreed, "but Papa would never join the WooPeace. He would be like a wild beast to get out of there and find me. I know him. So, if he was seen at the Drownlands Cutoff, he was there. To me, it's simple. He found a way out, and is coming back to see if perhaps I am here!" She closed her massive arms around Janty again and renewed her joyous hugging of the young Fox.

"Gasp...gasp...choke...wheeze...breath...air..." Janty's muffled voice was barely audible under Helga's ferocious hug.

"What? What's that you say, Janty?" Helga asked, releasing her grip.

Janty, looking somewhat dazed, smiled weakly. "I said, 'Thanks for letting me breathe!'" she replied.

"Oh, sorry!" Helga exclaimed. "Sometimes I forget my own strength. I just got so excited!"

"Well," JanWoo-Corriboo said, "if Breister is coming back to the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still,' he's only coming back because he wants to get back inside the WooPeace for some reason! Maybe he thinks you're there. He may have heard somehow that you were coming here, or perhaps he's just grasping at straws. There's no other reason he'd want to come here. I doubt he's coming for a health bath in the hot spring."

The group chuckled at Janty's flippant comment, but then she looked at them seriously. "If you want to try to find Breister, we've got to get a move on. If he is going to the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still,' you've got to go there. It's the one place that all Woonyaks know seems to offer a direct access to the WooPeace. "

Helga looked puzzled. "But I thought this was the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still!'"

Janty smiled. “Yes, it is,” she replied, “this general area goes by that name because the ancient stories say the land around here used to tremble with earth tremors. But there’s also a specific place that really gives this mountain its name. And that is where Breister might go if he were going to try to enter the WooPeace again. That very special place is just over that ridge, on the other side of the mountain!”

Burwell groaned. “Ooooo…Hike, hike, hike…That’s all we do! My poor little footsies have blisters on their blisters! And we don’t have enough food or water for a march. Where do we sleep? Do you want us to just lie on the rocks and starve?” He looked mournfully at his stomach. “I haven’t had anything to eat in hours! My bellybutton is rubbing against my backbone. Yep! Yep! Yep!”

“Well, you’re in luck, Burwell,” Janty said. “You and Bwellina won’t be walking far. Its unlikely Breister would come here, because no one knows about this entrance to the WooPeace but our family. After we say goodbye to my father, we’re going to visit my friend, Toshty. He has a cabin just on the other side of that ridge. You and Bwellina can stay there while Helga and I look for signs of Breister. Toshty won’t mind having some visitors.”

JanWoo-Corriboo looked lovingly at her father who was getting ready to go back into the WooPeace. “Good-bye, Father,” she said. “Please tell mother how much I love her. I miss you both so much!”

Tatty hugged her. “Janty, I feel certain that the day will come when we will no longer be separated like this. It’s nuts!” he laughed, looking at Helga.

After the group had said fond farewells to TatterWoo-Corriboo, Janty said, “O.K., folks, it’s time to head for Toshty’s. We’ll need to walk about two hours to get there.”

“Uh, Janty,” Burwell asked, “it’s absolutely pitch dark. Do you really want to try to do this now? I don’t climb mountains well in the dark!” He looked uncertainly at Helga, who only gave her constantly worrying friend a bemused smile. She, too, was wondering how they would make such a trip in the dark, but Burwell’s worrying was also a bit of comic relief for her.

“You know, Burwell,” Helga observed, “if we stay here overnight, your bellybutton will eat your backbone for breakfast, and then the Venom Bats will pick over your carcass. I recommend we go find a nice soft bed and a meal.” She smiled at her friend.

“Aye, aye, Captain Helgy,” Burwell saluted. “That’s a march I’ll sign up for! Yep! Yep! Yep!”

Janty had pulled out a small pronghorn flute from her pack, and was blowing it softly.

“A pronghorn flute!” Helga exclaimed in surprise. “I didn’t know anyone played that sort of flute around her.”

“No one does, except for me,” Janty replied. “I’ve always been a little off the beaten path, which is why my parents didn’t want me to stay in the WooPeace. They knew I would annoy WooZan so much she’d drive me out someday, if I didn’t go on my own! I was into too many things that would ‘disturb the WooPeace’ for me to stay there...” Janty chuckled. “Like pronghorn flutes—Toshty got this from a Roundie once and no one else could learn how to play it except me.”

“Yes,” Helga agreed, “the pronghorn flute is not easy to play. Few beasts, other than Wood Cows, have mastered it. I’m impressed that you can play.” Helga’s respect for Janty had received another boost.

“Well,” Janty said, “what I’ve discovered about the flute is that it has an amazing sound quality, that helps me to find my way in the dark!” She looked significantly at Burwell and demonstrated. “When you play the flute with a certain tone, like this...”

“...you can listen to the echoes of the tones and see an image of the terrain!” Helga completed the sentence.

Burwell looked doubtful. “Burwell, trust her,” Helga smiled. “It works. Wood Cows have always used the flute this way. I could do the same thing, but Papa—wherever he is—has my flute. If Janty knows how to use of the flute this way, I trust her. It is not easy for one to discover this quality of the flute alone. That Janty has discovered it means that she knows the flute very well.” This was a very special Fox, Helga thought to herself. A very special Fox.

# An Unbroken Circle of Friends

Breister, stuffing himself with Bisonbread and honey butter, was a very happy beast. He, Annie, and Toshty had found plenty of cave bird eggs and honeycomb to eat on their way down the Deep Springs River, but as Breister put it, “Eggs and honeycomb kept my body glued together, but everything inside my body is famished!” He held out his pants to show how much weight he’d lost during their float down the underground river.

Toshty laughed. “If you weren’t such a big galoot in the first place, you wouldn’t have such big pants to keep filled! Why, I didn’t lose an ounce.”

“Oh, yeah?” Breister responded. “You’ve got so many feathers, and then so many clothes, it’s hard to tell how much meat you actually have at any given time!”

Toshty, Annie, and Breister had safely completed their voyage down the Deep Springs River. After coming ashore at the Deep Springs Landing, they deflated the canoe and rolled it up for carrying. Then, Toshty took them to Elbin and Sareth Abblegurt’s dugout. When Sareth opened the door and welcomed them, Toshty walked in like he belonged there. Obviously he had visited many times before. Sareth and Elbin welcomed him like one of the family.

Introductions were made all around. Elbin and Sareth were astonished and pleased to learn that one of the visitors was the father of their dear Helga. “It seems to be such a small world sometimes,” Sareth observed happily, embracing Breister. “We, who have never traveled more than a few miles from our home, now lay eyes on Helga’s father, who has come from a distant land. I can barely imagine how big the world must be that you have traveled so long and far to get here. Yet, how small the distance seems when we embrace.”

“And all because of a crazy old Owl,” Annie scowled playfully.

“I met Elbin several years ago,” Toshty explained, “when I traded with him for some corn and beans at the market.” He grinned. “Well, it was actually the smell of Sareth’s cookies that first attracted me to their stall. There were a lot of vendors selling corn and beans, but only one had fresh Bison coffee and cookies!”

“Since then, we’ve become close friends,” Sareth said. “Toshty stays with us when he visits the Rounds. He’s a part of the family. Now, you

are, too. You're all welcome to stay with us." Looking fondly at Toshty, however, she offered an apology. "Sorry, old friend, but you'll have to sleep on a cot this time. We've only got two spare beds in the dugout. We need to honor Breister's visit by having him stay in the guest room, and Annie can have Helga's old room—we've kept it much as it was when she lived with us." The three travelers gladly accepted the offer of hospitality.

Somehow, although Breister had never been there before, it all seemed strangely familiar to him. Perhaps it was the fact that he had heard Helga tell so many stories about her years growing up with Elbin and Sareth. But he also remembered the vision he had had at the whirlpool. He didn't understand it. He was welcomed with such warmth in the Abblegurt round that he felt completely at ease. He seemed to be one of the family.

Breister appreciated the warm welcome, the hospitality, and the opportunity to get to know Elbin and Sareth. On the other hand, he also urgently wanted to continue his search for Helga. Thanking his hosts for their kindness, he mentioned his hope to leave the next day. Sareth would not hear of it. "You're not leaving this house until you don't look so pale and thin!" she declared. "You need at least a week of Bison bread, catfish, and greens! If you try to leave before then, I swear I will hide your clothes! Why, I might just burn them!" she exclaimed, giving Breister a laughing, but determined, look. Despite his protests, Breister knew he would have to stay a while. Country Bison were renowned for their hospitality, and equally known for their kind and humble, but absolutely unmovable, manner with guests.

"Just relax, my friend," Toshty advised. "Enjoy the food and friendliness. You've been through a lot. Sareth is right; you really do look thin. Rest up and renew yourself. You will feel stronger and be better able to continue your search." He patted his friend on the shoulder. "And besides," he added, "they are Helga's family, too, and they need to get to know you a bit."

Breister was thoughtful. He did want to honor the Abblegurt's as the family who had raised Helga. Helga often told him how much she longed to visit the Rounds, but there had been no way to leave the Hedgelands until they were expelled.

"How odd life is," Breister reflected, sitting at the hearth listening to the happy chatter in the Abblegurt dugout. "Helga, who so longs to be here, is not; and I, who know these Bison only as fanciful stories now come to life, am here! Helga would choose to come here in a minute, if she were able, yet I find myself here by the most amazing forces of chance. The very household where she was raised! In my vision, it was almost as if I knew I would someday be here...I could

see it...it was just like this."

Over the next few days, the travelers explored the Rounds with Elbin. He was an excellent guide, showing them places that even Toshty had never seen, despite his numerous visits. Breister found one of the places where Elbin took them especially interesting. They went to a rocky point overlooking a quiet pool along Hervy's Trickle. "Roundies often come here to jig for perch," he explained. The flat, overhanging rock was caked with smoky residue left by the fires and drippings of countless fish-frys.

"Well, this is certainly a sight to see," Breister said politely, wondering why they had gone on such a long walk to see a dirty, scorched boulder.

Elbin grinned at his visitor's puzzlement. "Look over the edge into the pool," he directed.

Breister, Toshty, and Annie did as had been suggested. Breister howled with glee. "HELGA!" The word was written with stones at the bottom of the clear, deep pool.

"Yes, Helga placed the rocks herself," Elbin explained, smiling fondly at Breister. "I knew this was a place you'd want to see." Breister's happy face confirmed this. "The rocks have been there since Helga left," he continued. "A ferocious snapping turtle inhabits the pool—Grandfather Vicious they call him. Most of us just refer to him as Grandbub Vic. He's said to be over 100 years old, but he's still fit enough to take off toes with a nip of his beak. I saw him once and he surely weighs at least 400 pounds—he's a terrible wonder to see! Why, there's been hunters go after him and come back with chunks of their hide gone, and their pikes and hooks left nothing by splinters. So, everyone just leaves him alone. The Deep Springs River is a much safer place to swim."

"Makes sense to me," Breister observed.

"Maybe so," Elbin agreed, "but, just before Helga left the Rounds, she wanted to say 'Good-Bye' in a unique way. You see the result."

"Well, it's true to her brave and strong-willed nature," Breister said with a tone of admiration. "Sounds just like something she would have done."

"And I imagine that no one is about to jump in there and change it," Toshty laughed.

"No," Elbin chuckled, "even if Helga made friends with Old Vic, or whatever she did, it will remain something only she would do."

With Elbin's help, the three friends became skillful at catching perch with a jigging pole. They pulled out 30 fish in just over an hour. "Grandbub Vic doesn't eat fish," Elbin explained. "The pool is full of them. But Hervy's Trickle is picked clean of just about any other water critter around the big snapper's territory—snakes, clams, frogs,

mussels, crawdads, smaller turtles—you name it, and the old fellow eats 'em. But the fish just go along like nobody's business. No one knows why. But it makes this a great place to catch them."

The delightful feast of fried fish they shared gave Breister a deep feeling of contentment. He felt that he had gained some precious closeness to his daughter, which he would have missed had he pressed quickly on in his search.

But, as the days passed, Breister's desire to continue his search grew. Not wishing to offend his generous hosts, he enjoyed the happy fellowship of the household. His feelings of restlessness continued to increase, however. He had resolved to share these feelings, when one morning he noticed that Sareth was up extremely early, rustling in the kitchen.

"Sareth," Breister inquired, coming out of his bedroom and rubbing his sleepy eyes, "it is more than an hour before sunrise. Why are you up so early today?"

"It is time for you to depart and I want to make some food for your journey," she said, smiling at him.

Breister began to protest that he did not want to leave, but Sareth put a finger to his lips, silencing him. "Don't want to leave!" she exclaimed, giving him a look of mock outrage. "What kind of a father would you be if you were fit, healthy, and fully able to travel, and yet you laid around here like a rug?" she asked, grinning at him. "Why, your Helga might be at the mercy of thugs and thieves! Or she might be wandering lost in the wilderness! What a fool I would be to have such a lazy fellow laying around my house while his daughter perished!" she continued, shaking a spoon at him. "Don't want to leave, indeed!" she sniffed playfully. "Why, you are commanded to leave. You must go find her! What do you think this is, a resort?" As the big Wood Cow's nose turned red with a deep blush of embarrassment, Sareth could see that she had succeeded in teasing Breister sufficiently for him to know he could leave without offending her. She put her arm over his shoulder and added, "But you have to promise that when you find Helga, you will bring her back here!"

"Oh, yes, ma'am," Breister stammered happily, "Yes, ma'am, you can count on it."

Later that morning, Toshty, Annie, and Breister caught the weekly running-wagon bound for the Drownlands Cutoff. "I have no way of knowing where Helga might be," he explained, as the three comrades said goodbye and got ready to board. "She could be anywhere. But I can't believe that Helga would have left me at the river. Either she was forced to leave, in which case I have no idea where she is; or she returned to the riverbank to look for me, and found me and our boat gone." He looked knowingly at Annie, who could not meet his eyes.

“Thus,” he continued, “the only possible lead I have, as opposed to just wandering around in all directions looking for her, is to return to the WooPeace. If she tried to follow me down the river, if she survived —” His voice trailed off and he covered his eyes. “If she survived,” he continued with a thick voice, “she is a Woonyak in the WooPeace. I at least have to see if she is there.” Breister was grief-stricken to think of such a fate befalling his beloved daughter. It was horrible to contemplate.

“That’s why going to Toshty’s cabin is the only thing that makes sense,” he concluded. “The unused entrance to the WooPeace that Toshty says is near his cabin—what he calls the ‘Mountain That Moves But Stands Still’—I’ve seen it from the inside. The WooSheep call it the LuteWoo. I don’t care if it is forbidden to enter the WooPeace there. The fact that folk are afraid even to go near it is actually a good thing in this case. I hope to slip in there without being seen and without having to swim!”

“And no way am I going to leave you two to face WooZan alone,” Annie declared, as she said goodbye to the Abblegurts and climbed onto the running-wagon. Annie reflected on how much she had enjoyed being welcomed into a loving family group. It was something she had never fully enjoyed in her life. It felt good. She looked at Toshty, who was sitting next to her in the running-wagon. “Toshty, do you ever get lonely?...I mean, living all alone and having no family?” she asked.

“My only family is my art,” Toshty replied. “I used to have family, but some are in the WooPeace and others are at the Bottoms. They all act like the others don’t exist. I don’t need a family like that.”

“But Toshty,” Annie continued, “art is not a family. Even if it makes you feel good, I think a family is creatures loving one another and caring for each other.”

Toshty looked kindly at Annie. “You’re right, Annie,” Toshty replied. “A family is an unbroken circle of friends.” He covered the Cougar’s paw with his wing. “We aren’t exactly an unbroken circle, but we *are* friends, and that’s a place to start.” Annie squeezed his wingtip and they grinned at each other. Breister, seeing this, reached across from where he was sitting and said, “I join myself to this circle, and now there are three.”

The friends smiled broadly at one another. “Family is an unbroken circle of friends,” Toshty said softly. “So even folks without family can be family!” Tears filled his eyes. “Even a crazy old Owl, with mixed up relations who hate each other can have a family...Thank you, friends. That is a wonderful thought.”

# Stupid Frog Shallows

As the running wagon began its journey to the Drownlands Cutoff, Breister reflected that this very running wagon had played a role in bringing Helga back to O'Fallon's Bluff three years before. After seven years apart, they had been reunited. Replaying in his mind the story Helga had told so often, gave Breister hope that perhaps once again this running wagon might play a role in reuniting him with his daughter...

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It was a lovely April morning when Helga began her year of service on the running wagon team that powered the *Drownlands Cutoff Weekly*. The *Weekly* was named for the first stop on its route, although in the course of a week the running wagon also made stops at more than a dozen other stations in the most remote parts of the Rounds, before coming back to its home station to start the circuit again.

Although worn and battered, the *Weekly* was clean and sturdy. Even if a little scruffy, the *Weekly* retained much of its original elegance of style, including an ornate set of running-lamps.

As the last baggage was loaded, the runners took their positions at the crossbars along the wagon tongue and prepared to pull the *Weekly* away from the station. The runners were eager to depart: shaking limbs and bouncing up and down to loosen tight muscles, rubbing chalk dust on the crossbars to make them easier to grasp, and slapping each other on the back in encouragement. A tall and lanky Coyote, with rings in her ears and long curling hair ending in a luxurious braid, wore the brilliantly colored headband of running-wagon steward. Responsible for the final check, she gave an encouraging look to each of her fellow runners. Seeing an empty spot at the eighth position, the Coyote gave a groan of frustration and made for the door of the station.

Just as she reached the station entrance, a frantic Jackrabbit burst suddenly out of the doorway, nearly slamming the door into the steward's face. Without stopping, the previously missing runner scrambled clumsily into position at the wagon. His comical haste attracted the notice of the travelers who chuckled heartily as they

peered through the passenger compartment windows.

"Now, my trammies," the Coyote cried, "all together, as if Nate Te'Sharn actually wished the *Weekly* to run out on time, as much as he wished to sleep."

"I don't care two coppers for the time," replied the Jackrabbit. "A body can't rest in the rough bunks here...and the Dock Squirrels rattling trunks and boxes and cursing a blue streak all night long...How's a body to rest?"

"Once we get rolling, you'll forget being tired," the Coyote replied. "Soon the warm sun will be in your face and you'll be hearing 'The Cutoff in Four' before you know it...then, you'll be having lunch and not fret your tired bones, I'll wager," the steward said good-naturedly. She could not feel harshly toward the tardy Jackrabbit. She knew that runners could be bleary-eyed and half-rested despite the day off between legs of the running-wagon circuit. As the *Weekly* pulled away from the station, it gradually picked up speed and, at first, rolled along with so little effort by the runners that it seemed to be powered only by the beat of the runners' feet.

But the easy progress did not last long beyond the Cutoff Station. The verdant lushness of the Drownlands wilderness is flanked by a seemingly endless wasteland of hard rock and dust running far to the south. The Smothercap Steps—foothills leading to the Smothercap highlands beyond—bald granite hills piled one on top of the other mile after mile. The single winding road through this desolate and harsh country gave the wagon runners exhausting work for more than twenty miles until the road once again broke free from the wilds.

"Yi-hep-ay! May-ni-ay-hep!" The wagon runners strained against the crossbars as they labored along the rough, bumpy track. Heads bent forward in exertion, the runners stumbled over ruts and stones, as if they might fall and be trampled by the other runners. Nevertheless, the runners continued doggedly on.

The last long hill before the Cutoff Station slowed the runners as they struggled for breath. Then, reaching the long, flat ridge the steward called out: "The Cutoff in Four!" The traditional call, shouted out as the wagon passed the Four-Mile marker before the next station, sent a surge of joy through the runners. They would soon have a rest. Finding renewed energy, the runners put full strength to their task and the wagon surged forward. Raising their heads, smiling broadly, runners laughed and joked as they strained toward the station.

Standing at the station as the running wagon pulled up, was a stout, stubby Beaver dressed in a station-master's uniform. Smackie, the Cutoff station-master, was an old friend of Helga's. Smackie often came over to tell jokes at celebrations at the Rounds and, during those visits, always stayed with Elbin and Sareth. The station-master was

renowed for his unending store of jokes and the fact that his huge teeth made a humorous smacking sound against his lip when he spoke.

But, as the running wagon pulled up at the station, Helga noticed that the station-master's usually good-natured expression was absent. In fact, she had no sooner stepped away from the crossbar, then Smackie suddenly threw his arms around her neck and burst into tears!

"What is it Smackie?" Helga asked. "Not heard any good jokes lately?"

"Oh! *(schmack)* Woes and torments! I've got *(schmack)* trembling *(schmack)* and vibrations *(schmack)* in my brain!" the station-master sobbed. "I am *(schmack)* ashamed of carrying *(schmack)* on like this. I beg your *(schmack)* pardon."

"There, there, Smackie," Helga replied, trying to console her unhappy friend.

"The strange," Smackie continued, *"(schmack)*…" Sobs again carried him away and he did not finish his sentence.

"What is strange?" Helga asked.

"The stranger *(schmack)* arrived at the Cutoff station *(schmack)* yesterday—a young Lynx *(schmack)*—you know *(schmack)* we never see Lynx 'round here *(schmack)!* Anyways, the Lynx *(schmack)* pestered and pestered *(schmack)* me to tell him how *(schmack)* get to the Norder Estates. He said he was (schmack) on some high-faluttin' mission *(schmack)* from the High One *(schmack)* and he got himself lost *(schmack)* on the Ocean of Dreams *(schmack)*. Instead of ending up in *(schmack)* the Norder Estates, he ended up in the Rounds (*schmack)*. He was wantin' terrible *(schmack)* bad to get to the Norder Estates *(schmack)*—said the High One *(schmack)* would beat him up *(schmack)* awful *(schmack)* if he failed."

"What did you tell him?" Helga asked.

"Why, I told him the *(schmack)* truth," Smackie replied. "I told him straight away *(schmack)* that there was no way *(schmack)* to the Norder Estates except *(schmack)* across the Borf lands, and *(schmack)* no right-thinkin' beast would *(schmack)* ever do that."

Smackie broke out in sobs again. "Oh! Woes and torments! *(schmack)* Woes and torments! *(schmack)* Woes and torments! *(schmack)* Why, that silly-headed beast *(schmack)* kept right on pesterin' me *(schmack)* and pesterin' me non-stop! He wouldn't *(schmack)* let me think *(schmack)* or eat or sleep *(schmack)*. Just pesterin' and pesterin' *(schmack)* sayin' he came to the Cutoff *(schmack)* thinkin' he could get to the (schmack) Estates from here. Why *(schmack)* he like to drove me *(schmack)* crazy with his pesterin' *(schmack)*. Oh! Woes and torments! *(schmack)* Woes and torments!"

"What's with the 'woes and torments,' Smackie? Why so glum?"

"Oh! Woes and torments! *(schmack)* Smackie sobbed again. "I've sent him *(schmack)* to his death! The Borf *(schmack)* will roast him and eat him *(schmack)!* He wouldn't listen *(schmack)* to me and went off to the *(schmack)* Borf lands! He wouldn't have *(schmack)* gone there if I *(schmack)* hadn't told him about it! Oh! *(schmack)* Woes and torments!"

"Come on, Smackie," Helga urged, "don't take it so hard. Why, how do you know the Borf will roast him? They might be friendly beasts—never met one myself and don't know much about them."

"Oh! They'll roast him *(schmack)* sure enough!" Smackie wailed. "Them Borf are a *(schmack)* fearsome tribe. Every beast *(schmack)* knows that! Why, my own Mamzy *(schmack)* used to tell me that *(schmack)* if I did not behave, the Borf *(schmack)* would come down Fool's Gap *(schmack)* and take me away *(schmack)* to roast on a spit! That scared the bewilickers out of me! And I *(schmack)* sent that Lynx onto the *(schmack)* roastin' spit, I did! Oh! *(schmack)* Woes and torments! I've never hurt a *(schmack)* beast in my life *(schmack)* before this! And now, I just sent *(schmack)* an innocent beast to the *(schmack)* roastin' spit!"

"Now just hold on there, Smackie," Helga exclaimed. "How long's that Lynx been gone?"

"Just a few minutes *(schmack)* before the *Weekly* pulled in *(schmack),*" the troubled station-master replied mournfully. "That's why you *(schmack)* found me so sad! I *(schmack)* tried so hard *(schmack)* to warn him, but *(schmack)* he just wouldn't listen *(schmack)*. I've never harmed *(schmack)* a beast in my *(schmack)* life! Oh! Woes and torments! *(schmack)*

"Well, he can't have gotten far," Helga replied, "which way did he go?"

"He asked me *(schmack)* where the road went *(schmack)* from here and *(schmack)* I told him *(schmack)* it went to Fool's Gap *(schmack)* and that they *(schmack)* call it Fool's Gap *(schmack)* because there's a *(schmack)* passage through the Smothercap *(schmack)* there, but only *(schmack)* a fool would *(schmack)* go there. Oh! Woes and torments! *(schmack)* That poor, poor beast *(schmack)!*"

"Now, Smackie," Helga smiled, "just calm yourself. I'd wager the running wagon will catch up with him before he reaches Fool's Gap. When we catch up to him—maybe I can talk some sense into him."

"Helga! Oh! *(schmack)"* Smackie exclaimed. "If you could *(schmack)* do that, it *(schmack)* would be wonderful *(schmack)!* That poor beast *(schmack)* knows nothing *(schmack)* of the dangers (*schmack)!* My Mamzy always *(schmack)* said that *(schmack)* Fool's Gap was nothing but *(schmack)* wilds and more wilds *(schmack)* and

wilds evermore *(schmack)!* The Drownlands is a *(schmack)* pleasantry compared *(schmack)* to the wilds between *(schmack)* here and the Borf lands! *(schmack)* Why, there's nothing *(schmack)*—not a wall or fence *(schmack)*—to welcome a beast *(schmack)* past the Fool's Gap Station *(schmack)!* Nothing! *(schmack)* Nothing! *(schmack)* Nothing but deserted *(schmack)* barren wilds to *(schmack)* get yourself thoroughly *(schmack)* lost—until the Borf *(schmack)* catch you!"

"Now, Smackie," Helga said with a comforting smile, "the running wagon will catch up to the Lynx and I'll talk sense to him! Why, you'll no more than have imagined how many times he has met a dreadful fate, than he will be back eating Snapped Catfish and drinking Plenty Punch-Aroo with you. You don't know how determined I can be when I've made up my mind. My parents didn't bring me into this world to sit back on my haunches when a fellow beast is in trouble. I'm going to send that Lynx back to you if I can. So don't worry, I'll do everything I can!"

Light began to return to Smackie's sorrowful face as he realized Helga was unshakeable in her resolve. "O.K., Helga," Smackie said with a shrug, "because I know you *(schmack),* it gives me hope *(schmack)*. I'll try not *(schmack)* to worry."

"Ay't, ay't, Smackie!" the running steward added, joining the conversation. "The runners will help Helga also. When we catch up with the Lynx, if Helga is not able to talk some sense into the Lynx, why the runners will just—shall we say—add our strength to her arguments! As soon as the passengers and baggage are unloaded and the runners are rested, we'll go after the Lynx. Our runners will catch up to him soon enough."

"So the Lynx is probably planning to follow Fool's Gap through the Smothercap," Helga said, pointing toward a massive range of hills in the distance. Every Roundie knew that the only sure way out of the Rounds was through the Drownlands Cutoff Station and across the Drownlands. Maps were labled "Impassable Wilds" beyond the Fool's Gap Station in the direction of the Smothercap. The wagon road turned north at the Fool's Gap Station and left the Smothercap Steps behind. Fool's Gap was a barren wasteland inhabited only by biting sand flies and other such pests and vermin. But somewhere, Fool's Gap cut through the Smothercap, and the Borf lands lay beyond that. No Roundie would ever go there—no, never.

"Not to worry, Smackie," Helga said a while later, as the running wagon prepared to depart. "We'll catch up to the Lynx and send him back to you—even if it takes all of us!"

"I'm sure *(schmack)* you will, Helga," Smackie said, his old jovial look returning. "But, please *(schmack)* be careful *(schmack)*—the early bird catches *(schmack)* the worm, but the second mouse *(schmack)*

gets the cheese *(schmack)*. Just please be *(schmack)* careful."

So it was that good-byes were said and the running wagon set off for the Fool's Gap Station. The section of road between the Cutoff Station and Fool's Gap Station became wilder with every mile. The Smothercap Steps in that area were a rugged wilds, untraveled beyond the road except by wind, a wilderness where the traveler should stay on the road or soon become lost.

After traveling for about two hours, the running steward called out, "Stupid Frog Shallows! Rest break!"

The running wagon coasted to a stop beside a swiftly flowing stream. The river had cut a main channel through bare soft rock some distance from the shore. Harder rock near the road had better resisted the river and formed a wide shallows perfect for wading or swimming.

Normally, when the running wagon stopped at Stupid Frog Shallows, as soon as the wagon stopped the runners bolted for the shallows to cool off and relax. On this occasion, however, as the wagon approached the river, something else captured the runners' attention. A Lynx was standing knee deep in the water!

Hearing the wagon approach, the Lynx turned and called out: "Yo-Ho! Who's that? What goes there?"

"Some friends!" Helga called back.

"Friends!" the Lynx replied. "I could very much use some friends just now!"

"My name is Helga and we are runners on the *Drownlands Cutoff Weekley* wagon bound for Fool's Gap. Who are you and how can we help?"

"Aye't! Aye't!" the rest of the runners shouted.

"I am a Climbing Lynx in the service of the High One, Lord of all the Hedgelands. My important mission to the Norder Estates has come to trouble. As ashamed as I am to admit it, through misfortune I have lost my way. With the High One impatient and his mission weighing heavily on me, I desperately need to get back on track. The kind station-master at the Drownlands directed me to Fool's Gap saying that offered a passage back into the Hedgelands. Although that will much delay me, at least I can again find my way."

"Tallo, Lynx!" Helga replied. "We have hurried along, hoping to catch up with you. Fool's Gap is impassable and dangerous. You cannot go that way. Rest a bit here at Stupid Frog Shallows, then go with us on our route. We will find a better way for you to—"

Before Helga could complete her sentence, the Lynx exclaimed, "Stupid Frog Shallows! Did you say this place is called Stupid Frog Shallows?"

"Why, yes," Helga said with surprise. "Do you know this place?"

"No," the Lynx replied, "but my great-grandfather's nickname was

Stupid Frog—surely he must be connected with this place! The name 'Stupid Frog' is not in wide use, I imagine. There must be a connection."

"How did your great-grandfather get his nickname," Helga asked with astonishment.

"Family lore says that, as a young Lynx he was traveling in the wilderness. It was the season when there were many frogs in the water and my great-grandfather began eating every frog he could catch. His companions could not believe that he was eating something as disgusting as wild, uncooked frogs, and they kept yelling at him, 'Don't eat the stupid frogs! Don't eat the stupid frogs!' And, well, the nickname stuck."

"You don't know what your great-grandfather was doing here, do you?" Helga asked. "It's very unusual to see a Lynx in the Rounds. In fact, I don't think a Lynx has been seen in the Rounds in a long time." The rest of the runners agreed that they'd never before seen or heard of a Lynx in the Rounds.

"I don't know what brought my great-grandfather here. It would be interesting to know that, especially now that I know that this must be the place where he was."

"This place is called Stupid Frog Shallows because in olden days there were many frogs here," the running steward said. "It's never been clear to me why the 'Stupid' was in the name, but the 'Frog' comes from the fact there used to be lots of frogs here. Maybe now we know where the 'Stupid' came from."

"If 'Stupid Frog Shallows' comes from your great-grandfather," Helga mused, "something must have happened that got his name associated with this place—maybe he came here many times?"

"Who knows," the Lynx replied. "I have no idea. Interesting to ponder, though."

"Yes, interesting to ponder," Helga agreed.

"Come on, now," the running steward urged, "we've got to get going soon, so cool off if you want, but be quick about it! We pull out in ten minutes."

"Come on, Lynx," Helga invited, "climb aboard and we'll take you with us. We can figure out how to help you later."

"Ah, you shouldn't worry yourself about me," the Lynx replied. "I have no fear either about my current prospects. I'll ride with you to Fool's Gap, then I must continue across the Borf lands to the Norder Estates. I am a royal Climbing Lynx on my first mission from the High One—I dare not end in failure." The Lynx paused, looked over his new acquaintance, and continued, "You have found me as you wished and I most definitely tell you that I will not return with you. I have my duty to perform and am not afraid."

“I can see you are a brave and capable beast,” Helga replied. “But you have no idea how dangerous it is in the Borf lands.”

“I don’t care about the danger,” the Lynx said firmly. “I have heard that just across the Borf lands lies the Woods Blow Wad, a vast forest wilderness I have visited many times. Once I get there, I can find my way to the main Hedgeland roads and get back on my way.”

“WOODS BLOW WAD!” Helga exploded. “YOU KNOW THE WAD? YOU’VE BEEN THERE MANY TIMES? DO YOU KNOW ANY WOOD COWS?” Helga could not believe what she was hearing. The Wood Cows frequented Woods Blow Wad—locally known as simply ‘the Wad’—because it had some of the finest wood in the Hedgelands. “HAVE YOU MET WOOD COWS IN THE WAD? DO YOU KNOW BREISTER? EMIL? HAVE YOU HEARD OF HELBARA?” Helga shot the questions out in a stream of excitement.

“Whoa, there, friend,” the Lynx replied. “Yes, I know the Wood Cow clan well. As a wee Lynx, I spent a lot of time in the Wad because it’s got fabulous rocks for climbing practice. And, yes, I know Breister and Emil. I came across them in the Wad one day and I helped them move some wood they had collected and we’ve met a few other times as well.”

Helga was so excited she could not contain herself. And, that excitement carried her all the way up Fool’s Gap, over the Smothercap, and across the Borf lands with her new-found Lynx friend. Soon after, she and the Lynx found Breister and Emil collecting wood in the Wad. So it was that, after a seven year absence, Helga was reunited with her family at O’Fallon’s Bluff.

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Breister smiled as he recalled the story of Helga’s return to her family three years ago.[1] The story gave him hope that the *Drownlands Cutoff Weekly* might once again play a role in reuniting him with his beloved daughter.

# Annie's Story

For a long time, the three friends rattled along silently, dozing, fidgeting, and gazing out the window. Breister, however, noticed that Annie seemed to be preoccupied—softly singing a song over and over. Her eyes were closed and her head moved gently as if in rhythm with some inner music. Although her lips moved, only by listening intently could Breister catch the words Annie sang:

*There was an old salt a-going to sea,*
*But his jolly good ship, not a sail had she,*
*He took his red nightshirt, cook's apron, 'n mate's socks,*
*And with the crew's noserags, sailed away from the docks.*
*A-sailing, a-sailing,*
*Sailing over the sea,*
*What a fine sailor—NAY—fine tailor, was he!*

With a smile playing across her face, Annie repeated the song, sometimes singing the verse, other times, just humming the tune. Breister watched her with puzzlement. This was another unexpected side to the hardened bandit. Beneath her scars and fierce appearance, there was someone who knew silly songs. What was Annie's story? There was more to the Cougar than he yet knew, Breister realized.

Drawn far into his own musings by Annie's curious reverie, Breister did not notice he was staring at Annie, until the Cougar spoke, startling him. "What are you gaping at? Never heard a sea shanty before?" Annie teased playfully.

Embarrassed to have been caught stupidly staring at his friend, nevertheless, Breister's curiosity pushed him on. "I thought it was a sea shanty," Breister replied, "but I never knew you had gone to sea."

"No, I've never been on a ship," Annie smiled. Closing her eyes again, she seemed to return to the inner world somehow related to the sailors' rhyme...

*A-sailing, a-sailing,*
*Sailing over the sea...*

For some minutes, neither of them said anything more. Deciding

not to pursue the subject further, Breister turned to watch the countryside pass by.

Then Annie spoke: “My mother, Bram Dorothea, taught me the song,” she began. “She went to sea for one voyage, and it strongly affected her. The verse came from the happy days she spent aboard ship. All that talk about family got me thinking about her.”

Breister’s curiosity was now greatly aroused. “Annie, you have to tell me more,” he pleaded. “I feel like we’ve become close friends—and I’ve been wondering about your family. I guess you and your mother must have been close. What happened to her?”

Annie looked away from Breister, as if gauging how much more she wanted to say. Then, making up her mind, she woke up Toshty. “Brighten up your bulb, old fellow, you won’t want to miss this,” she said, lounging back comfortably into her corner of the compartment. Roused from his sleep, Toshty blustered about “so-called friends that spoil perfectly good naps,” but was quieted by a motion from Breister, who sensed that Annie was readying herself to tell a story.

“Bram grew up in the Estates of the Norder Wolves,” Annie began. “It is a beautiful land. Majestic, forbidding mountains surround the Estates, but give way to a flat coastal plain where most of the inhabitants live. The farmland along the coast is rich and produces abundant crops. My mother used to tell me stories about how, when she was small, her family’s storage barrels overflowed with corn, yams, and vegetables. Although there were fourteen in the household—she had seven sisters and four brothers—they had plenty to eat at first.

“The Estates produced bountiful crops, but Bram’s family had a precarious life. They depended on the Bunge-Hoedt—or ‘the Bunge’ as it was commonly called. Under Norder Law, some designated land—the Bunge-Hoedt—was set aside for the common laboring beasts to use. All Estate lands belonged to the Barons of the Estates, who, by ancestral right, were Norder Wolves. Norder Law required the commoners—the Bungeons—to serve their Baron and work his lands. In return, they were allowed to work the Bunge. Bungeons normally had large families so that there were hands enough to work both the Baron’s lands and their own land as well.

“Bunge-Hoedt means, literally, ‘magic lands,’” Annie continued. “They are called ‘magic lands’ because they appear and disappear like magic! A mighty river, the Urrannay, flows down out of the mountains and meanders through the Norder Wolf Estates before emptying into the Great Sea. Every spring, snowmelt from the mountains and spring rains cause awesome flooding along the Urrannay. The floods pile up silt and leave behind a multitude of small, temporary islands in the river. These islands are the Bunge-Hoedt. The silt gives the islands

very fertile soil, so they are good for farming, but the same floods that give these 'magic lands' can also take them away. Some islands last many, many years. The best of the Bunge lands remain stable for decades, but many come and go in a single season. As the islands come and go, Bungeons must move about, hopping from island to island, scratching out their sustenance.

"In olden times, and even while mother was a young beast, the Bungeons, by hard work, lived simply, but well. Then, the Barons began usurping the most stable Bunge-Hoedt islands for their own use and adding them to their Estates. The common beasts were left with only the most temporary, least stable islands. As the Barons' claims expanded, the Bungeons spent more and more time working for the Barons, and had less desirable land to farm for their own needs. Smaller and less productive lands soon reduced the common farmers to dire poverty and want.

"Where there had been rich fields of corn and yams, there were now bare patches of poor barley and coarse peas. The good common feeling and mutal concern, of the ancient times, between the Barons and their Bungeons withered. The Barons went about in fine silk, while mother's family sometimes boiled their shoes with grass to make soup.

"In spite of their troubles, Bram's cottage had one wealth that Barons might die for, had they knowledge of it. The cottage, with only one poor window, an empty pantry, and rarely a set of clothes without patches, still and all had fourteen loving hearts and educated minds. If Bram's family was poor in the ways of the world, they were rich in 'the wealth that cannot be taken or taxed,' as Mother used to say.

"Bram's parents decided that, 'If we be poor and hungry, our children will not be beggars in their minds!' They taught each of their young beasts to read and learn all they could. They believed that reading was worth more than sitting outside some great Baron's door begging for onions. 'What is in your mind and heart is the only thing that is surely and truly yours,' my mother learned. 'Gain all you can of mind and heart and no moth or Baron can take it!' Each night, the few books they could gather were read again and again by candlelight. During the long winter's nights, they made plays—creating entire fantastic worlds—out of those few bare books!

"This was the secret of Bram Dorothea. This was the secret that gave her a life instead of starving humiliation. This is the secret that gave me a mother rather than a slave to the Baron.

"When Bram Dorothea was sixteen, things grew especially desperate in the Bunge. One year a terrible drought killed many of the crops. The next year it rained too much and more Bunge lands than usual were swept away by flooding. Bram Dorothea and her twin

brother, Rideon Morgan, decided to set off on their own and leave the Estates of the Norder Wolves forever.

"They resolved to sign on as crew of a sailing ship—*Dainty's Shant*—bound across the Great Sea. Rideon had met a sea captain who told him that there was work for young beasts in the newly opened lands across the Great Sea. 'Yes, Bram,' Rideon said, 'Captain Ord says that I can easily get work and you can teach school in Port Newolf!' Excited and hopeful, they signed on to Captain Ord's crew.

"Bram and Rideon crossed the Great Sea cleaning and serving for their keep on *Dainty's Shant*. Bram taught some of the sailors to read. She loved to teach reading. It felt like she had found a life for herself. She talked constantly about her dream of becoming a teacher when they reached port. She and Rideon were happy.

"When I was just a young bit of a Cougar, mother used to play a game with me that recalled those happy days that were such a turning point in her life." Annie paused for several moments, once again returning to the memories that had stimulated her to tell her story.

Then she continued: "We would create a make-believe deck of the *Dainty's Shant,* and mother told me wonderful yarns. I especially liked the stories about the ship's carpenter, Klemés ma di son Colé. He taught mother the song I was singing. Mother described him as a weathered old salt—a stocky Wood Cow of medium height, with a bulge of fat around his belly. He had a leathery, sunburned nose and twinkling eyes under heavy lids. Mother made me laugh with her impersonations of him—especially his 'stormy' voice. Klemés taught Bram and Rideon how to trail fish lines from the stern of the ship and played impromptu concerts on his flute. He taught them dances with loud stomping and singing, and such antics irked Captain Ord a good deal. Mother said that, one night, the good Captain—fuming in his nightshirt—threatened to spike the deck with nails if the stamping and hollering continued! She said that everyone had a good laugh, but cut the noise immediately.

"All in all, Captain Ord was a good and just Wolf Salt who took care to see that mother and Rideon arrived in port safely. After docking in Port Newolf, Bram saw something that changed her life. Feeling young and energetic, Bram and Rideon said goodbye to Captain Ord and set out to find situations in Port Newolf. The bustling town made them feel hopeful. Everywhere creatures loaded down with pails and sacks or pulling carts jostled them. Although the town had the look of having sprung up overnight, the muddy streets surged with energy. There surely looked to be plenty of work to do. But they had barely begun exploring the town, when they saw a group of Grizzly Trackers preparing a young Cougar to be hanged on a gallows. Bram was horrified at the sight—a burlap bag tied over his

head...Chains circling his entire body...A noose being fitted around his neck. She could not stand the grotesque and barbaric sight. Whatever the Cougar had done did not deserve such treatment! Bram felt nearly sick to her stomach.

"Forgetting all manners and courtesy, Bram rushed forward and pushed her way toward the Cougar, begging for his life. 'No, please, don't hang him! Take me instead! I demand it!' The Grizzly Trackers were greatly surprised. They had never seen such a thing.

"At that time, Port Newolf was a wild frontier and rogues and hellions were a dime a dozen. Judgment of criminals was swift and harsh. Most offenders were simply told to 'move on and not come back.' Many of the lawless ones were sent into the Drownlands where they lost themselves in the swamps and were forgotten. At times a lawbreaker was sent to the gallows as an example of what could happen if they did not run away. That was the fate of the young Cougar.

"Murmurs in the crowd said that the young Cougar, Stuppy Marit, was a small-time pirate. Others said he was just in unlucky circumstances. No one knew, or really cared. Port Newolf was rough, and justice, at best, was untidy.

"In the end, Bram's pleas prevailed. The Grizzly Trackers set Stuppy Marit free, on condition that he head off into the Drownlands and lose himself there. They ordered my mother to go with him. 'Yea, he goes free on your plea, my lass,' the Grizzly judge said. 'But your plea takes you with him. Plead for a no-good, and you become one.'

"Captain Ord and Rideon tried to rescue Bram from her fate, but to no avail. The Grizzlies, having released one criminal, would not change their minds on another one. Grizzly law on the frontier was stern. 'Plead for a no-good, and you become one.' Threatened by the Grizzlies that they would seize his ship and burn it if he continued to argue with them, Captain Ord sadly gave up his attempt to save Bram from exile into the Drownlands. Rumor has it that the good captain soon after gave up sailing and never went to sea again.

"The story of Bram in the Drownlands is long and has a considerable sadness to it. I will not tell it all to you now. But you must know that my mother was a good and honorable Cougar. She was forever good. She married Stuppy and, for many years, held hope for his reform. At first, she believed his promises that he wanted her to start a school for his workers and the other beasts that were drawn to him. Alas, he was too coarse and uncouth to know what he was promising, or to keep his pledge. Each time a school would be started, King Stuppy would overrule mother's homework assignments and allow the filth of his scurvy 'royal court' to grow. Mother refused to teach school where no one wanted to learn and where everyone had a

unique personal stench.

"But her secret remained. Not even King Stuppy could take it from her. Little by little, the increasing size of King Stuppy's scurvy crowd, and the mounting tide of filth and vile odors they brought, caused Bram to silently withdraw her attempts to start a school. But she withdrew with a purpose in mind. She would teach her daughter well. So, even in spite of the King, mother taught me to read and speak a proper tongue.

"'I refuse life on the lowest terms for you, Annie,' she used to say. 'What is in your mind and heart is the only thing that is surely and truly yours. Gain all you can of mind and heart and no one can take it!'

"So, you see, friends," Annie concluded, "my father is King Stuppy Marit—the wealthiest trader, and self-proclaimed ruler, of the Drownlands—but he never cared about me, or my mother. Bram just gradually faded away, like a candle burning out. The wealthier the King got, the more she withdrew and focused on teaching me. She just couldn't stand the way he treated the creatures. I hated it, too. Finally, I ran away and joined a gang of bandits who were raiding King Stuppy's traders. I thought it was a great way to get back at him..." She grew thoughtful, staring off into space.

"But it turned out not to be so great, is that it?" Toshty asked gently.

Annie sighed. "I'm still looking for the unbroken circle of friends." She looked at Breister and Toshty. "But maybe I can finally learn everything my mother tried to teach me. Maybe even unfortunate, foolish Cougars—just like crazy Owls—can have a real family?" This was phrased as a question, but sounded more like a statement of hope.

For several minutes, Annie said nothing more, allowing what she had shared to sink in. She noticed that Breister seemed to be considering something. At last, she asked him about it.

"What's on your mind, Breister," she said. "You look like your thoughts are far away."

Breister smiled. "Yes, there was something very interesting to me in your story."

Annie looked questioningly at him.

"I was just thinking how interesting it is," he began. "I apprenticed with an old Wood Cow carpenter—a retired seafarer. I was just wondering if Bram's friend might have been the same old salt...His name was Klemés ma di son Colé!"

"You knew Klemés—the old ship's carpenter?" Annie exclaimed. "The name is unusual enough that it seems likely that it might be the same one!"

"Yes," Breister agreed slowly. "And there's something especially

interesting to me about old Klemés. While I was his apprentice, I took note of his young and lovely granddaughter...Her name was Helbara..."

# A Parting of Ways

When the travelers arrived, dusty and road weary, at the Cutoff station, they moved quickly toward bed. They hoped to get an early start the next day. As the three friends unloaded their bags, Breister talked pleasantly for a few minutes with Zeke, the station-master, telling him a bit about his travels. A few days later, Zeke, in turn, would entertain a Bayou Dog named Burwell with his stories about the strange trio he had met. But, as he drifted off to sleep, all Breister knew was that he felt a growing sense that he was, at last, somehow close to Helga's trail.

Breister, Annie, and Toshty set out early the next morning in the bladder canoe. "We paddle for several days through the backwaters of the Drownlands," Toshty explained, "then we travel for a few days up a stream that runs into WooSheep Bottoms. From there, it's just a short hike to my cabin."

The next several days brought a closer sense of friendship among the travelers. Something wonderful had happened to break through the icy loneliness that had long sent Toshty and Annie off on their isolated paths. Breister, for his part, felt a sense of relief and comfort to feel that he could trust these friends. Together, they were all happier and stronger than any of them had been apart.

On the fourth day of their voyage up the creek toward WooSheep Bottoms, Breister sensed that Annie was agitated. Toshty, too, seemed ill at ease. Something was up, Breister knew, but his friends were not saying what was bothering them.

The next morning, Breister was roasting some fresh frog legs on a spit for their breakfast, when Annie cleared her throat to get his attention. He looked up at her expectantly, continuing to turn the roasting spit over the campfire.

Annie smiled at him. She was holding Toshty's wing in her paw. "Breister," she began, "Toshty and I have something to tell you."

Looking at the joy in the eyes of his friends, Breister felt that he did not really have to be told what they were going to say, but he replied, "I'm all ears. Go ahead."

Annie pulled Toshty forward as she moved closed to Breister. "I'm not going any further with you, Breister." He looked at her questioningly. "As you know, some of my past is not very pleasant.

I'm not proud of that. I want to leave that behind me and start a new life. I know there are Grizzly Bear trackers all over the Bottoms looking for me. If I go to the Bottoms, my life will be over..." She stopped and looked at Toshty.

"I've asked Annie to marry me," Toshty grinned. "And she seems to like crazy old Owls!" He hugged Annie's shoulder with one of his wings. "So, we're taking the long route back to the cabin," Toshty said, with a look of contentment. "We'll see you there later, perhaps, but don't wait for us. We're going back to the Rounds to get married first. Annie can't go to WooSheep Bottoms, and we don't want to go to the Drownlands or the WooPeace, so that leaves the Rounds."

Breister nodded and smiled at his friends. "I wish you the best...in making your unbroken circle of friends stronger," he said with a loving look at his happy companions. "Now, I just need to find the rest of my circle!"

"Don't worry, Breister," Toshty replied. "We're not leaving you in the lurch! I can give you directions to my cabin. When you get there, make yourself at home..." He paused, looking embarrassed. "I actually need you to do something for me there," he continued. "I have some art lessons scheduled for tomorrow. There will be a couple of Otters and a Fox who will come to the cabin expecting me to teach them to paint," he laughed. "I'd be much obliged if you would be there to tell them that, well, uh," he smiled at Annie, "that art lessons are postponed until further notice!"

Breister smiled, but felt a bit annoyed. His friends were leaving him. Not only that, but helping Toshty might delay his own search for Helga.

"And, Breister," Toshty said, "the young Fox I mentioned—name's JanWoo-Corriboo—she's one of the most amazing young beasts you'll ever meet. She can take you to the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still'—you can trust her completely and she's as brilliant as they come. You'll be in good hands with her. If your Helga is anywhere to be found, JanWoo-Corriboo can help you find her."

Breister's annoyance evaporated. He was happy for his friends and felt confident of his path forward. If all was not yet well for him, he felt somehow that things were improving.

The three friends loaded their belongings back in the bladder canoe and set off again. "We'll paddle with you a bit further toward the Bottoms," Toshty said. "There's a little sandspit that is covered with trees, bushes, and reeds. We'll drop you off there. It's not far from my cabin. Then we'll paddle back to the Drownlands Cutoff to catch the running-wagon back to the Rounds. The next time you see us, we'll be husband and wife." Toshty beamed.

A few hours later, Toshty beached the canoe among some dense

reeds. As Breister got out of the canoe, he was well concealed by vegetation. Only the faint rustle of leaves and the gurgling of the stream broke the silence. It was as if they were in a small pocket of life in a vast and barren land.

"Don't be fooled by what you see," Toshty advised. "Just around that bend up ahead lies WooSheep Bottoms. Unless I miss my guess, you'll start hearing the wild screams of young beasts at the swimming hole as soon as you get out of these trees. But don't go to the swimming hole. Follow the directions I gave you. You'll get to the cabin just fine."

The friends enjoyed a last round of farewells. Then, Toshty and Annie paddled away. Breister watched their progress for a while until Toshty's voice came wafting back across the water. "Tell JanWoo-Corriboo that I told her to show you the painting she calls *Eye Of The All*," Toshty yelled. "She'll know what I mean." With that, the canoe floated around the bend and Breister was alone.

Breister sat watching the place where the canoe had disappeared. He half-expected Toshty and Annie to reappear. But, no, he didn't really expect that at all. He just hoped with all his heart that this would not be the last time he would see his friends. Slowly, he reached down and picked up his pack. He took out a piece of Bison bread and, munching on it with a special pleasure coming from his growing connections with the Rounds, he walked away from the river.

He had not walked more than a few minutes, following the directions that Toshty had given him, when a large squad of Grizzly Bear trackers stepped out of the brush and surrounded him. Although Breister had nothing to fear from the trackers himself, his heart beat wildly.

Grizzly Bear trackers were specially trained officers of the law, whose task it was to track down the worst rogues and bandits and bring them to justice. They were renowned for their bravery and skill against the most dangerous desperadoes.

A particularly large Grizzly Bear, with part of his ear gone, and a long scar on his nose, stepped toward Breister. Showing his law badge, he growled, "Where ya been, and where ya goin'?"

"I've been in the Rounds and I'm on my way to see some friends near the Bottoms," Breister replied. The Grizzly Bear looked him over closely, peering directly into his face, looking for any hint of dishonesty.

"What's yer business, and who ya seen?" the Grizzly Bear growled again, fingering a long stout coil of rope that hung from his belt, next to a long Bowie knife. "We're looking for some Cougar bandits that are in need of this rope," the tracker snarled unpleasantly. "There's two nasties that especially need this rope," he continued. "One's called

Broken Eye, and the other's Slasher Annie. They's been terrorizing the innocents in the Bottoms. We tracked them up into the mountains and lost 'em..." The Grizzly Bear ran his finger along the scar on his nose. "This here's the calling card of those dirtbags," he declared angrily. "Ya seen anyone?"

"I hope you get that Broken Eye fellow," Breister replied calmly. "I hope that scalawag gets just what he deserves," Breister added. "He attacked me up in the mountains, so I'm glad to see you're after him." Breister felt happy. Maybe he could keep them away from the subject of Annie.

"Who ya seen," the Grizzly Bear repeated. He obviously was determined to be thorough.

"I saw an old Owl and his wife," Breister replied simply. "That's all I've seen in days."

"An old Owl and his wife," the Grizzly Bear repeated, looking intently at Breister. "Ya sure that's all ya seen?"

"Yes," Breister replied with conviction, "I can assure you that that is all I've seen—an old Owl and his wife."

The Grizzly Bear reached into the pocket of his barkskin coat. He handed Breister a blue pebble. "This is our trackin' stone," he explained. "We leave it with ya. You see a sign of Broken Eye and his gang and you show that stone to any law officer and they'll know that's our team. They'll know how to find us."

Breister thanked them. "If I see that old scoundrel or his gang," Breister assured the trackers, "I'll use the tracking stone. You can be sure of that."

Satisfied, the Grizzlies moved on. Breister walked on a few steps and prepared to leave the stream behind, as he turned inward toward Toshty's cabin. "Well," he said to himself looking at the tracking stone, "Broken Eye and his gang are no more. There's no need for this." Saying this, Breister skipped the blue stone out across the stream, where it sank to the bottom.

He continued on his way, reaching Toshty's cabin in the middle of the afternoon. He made a cheerful fire in the hearth, ate a modest meal of Bison bread, and settled in to wait for Toshty's students. He was especially looking forward to meeting JanWoo-Corriboo. Perhaps she could help him find Helga.

# Reunited

Breister was sound asleep, not expecting any visitors to Toshty's cabin until the following day, when there was a loud rap at the door.

"Come on, Toshty, wake up!" JanWoo-Corriboo yelled. "I know I'm early for my lesson, but things have gone a little differently than I planned. We've got some friends that need your help!"

Groggily, Breister sat up and rubbed his eyes. It was pitch black. The fire in the hearth had died down to embers. It must be the middle of the night. Who was knocking at this hour?

"Who's there?" Breister called. "Toshty is not here. I'm his friend, Breister, who is supposed to wait here for some of Toshty's friends to arrive. Who are you?" Breister had not yet opened the door, waiting for reply.

There was a brief silent pause on the other side of the door, and then pandemonium broke out. There was joyful yelling and shouting and banging on the door! "Papa! Papa! It's Helga! I'm here! Open the door!"

Completely dumbfounded, Breister threw open the door to the wild embrace of his long-lost daughter. An emotional re-joining of a broken circle of friends occurred. Breister put new kindling on the embers of the fire and soon there was the happy sound of laughter and the smell of fresh Bison coffee being brewed.

Helga was surprised by the smell. "Bison Coffee!" she exclaimed. "Why, I haven't smelled that in a while, but it's a smell you never forget! You've been to the Rounds, haven't you?" she gasped, looking at Breister.

"Yes, yes, my dear," Breister replied, "I spent a week in the home of Sareth and Elbin Abblegurt." He smiled at his daughter, knowing how much this pleased her.

"Well, I can certainly see that there's a long story to catch up on," Helga chuckled.

"Yes," Breister agreed, "there is much to tell."

As the night wore away, the friends shared stories and learned about each other's adventures and trials. Breister was saddened to see how much his daughter's injuries inhibited her movements. His mind reeled as he realized exactly who had been responsible for the attack.

"Papa, let it go," Helga consoled him. "It's over. There's nothing

that you can do to heal my injuries by having anger toward Annie. She wants a new life...one she never had. She's left the old ways behind. Let us leave the old ways behind, too. I'm more worried about Janty than I am about Annie at this point," Helga concluded, nodding in the direction of the young Fox, who was sitting alone on the back porch of the cabin. "She's been there almost all night," Helga observed, "just staring off into the sky. Something's eating on her. I'm worried. She's usually so full of life and energy."

Breister nodded. Helga stood up and they walked together over to where JanWoo-Corriboo was sitting.

"Pretty night, eh?" Helga began. "One of the nice things about isolated areas is that the night sky is so awesome. You don't see stars like this in town."

Janty said nothing. She seemed intent on something she was viewing in the sky. Breister, following a hunch, tried a different approach. "Say, Janty," he began, "Toshty said to ask you to show me your painting he called *Eye Of The All*. Do you think you could show it to me sometime?"

A faint smile flickered on Janty's lips, "That's what I'm working on right now," she replied softly. "I'm not ignoring you, but I don't want to lose my concentration."

Janty was memorizing the night sky. Star by star. Constellation by constellation. She was fixing every star in her memory and giving each of them her own special names. "As I learn all the stars, and give them names, I'll paint them in one of the caves," JanWoo-Corriboo explained. "It will be the great work of my life. I call it *Eye Of The All* because that must be something like what it is for *The All*—having so many, many preciously beautiful creatures, in so many different patterns, all with their own unique names and places. Don't you think that's what *The All* must be like?"

Neither Helga nor Breister responded. They were impressed by the image that Janty had offered them, but also sensed a sadness in her voice. "The stars are my family," she continued, "no matter how much I long for my parents and wish they were with me, I can always count on the stars to be there. No matter what the creatures do, and how foolish they are, the stars are always the same. They're unmoved by it all. They're always there for you. That's what a real family is like."

"But, Janty," Helga said gently, "don't you think you could have a real family? Don't you think there might be a way for you and your parents to be united?"

"NO!" JanWoo-Corriboo shouted. "NO! I don't think it's possible! The stupid WooSheep are so fouled up and prejudiced and ignorant, no one can fix it! It's been going on for centuries and will go on forever! THERE IS NO WAY TO FIX IT! Don't you see? Don't you get

it?" she cried, breaking into sobs.

Helga comforted her. "No, Janty, I don't get it," she said. "I don't get how creatures can create something but can't uncreate it. That's what doesn't make any sense to me. If creatures really want to uncreate something, they can. That's what I believe." Helga stroked Janty's hair as the young Fox sobbed with her face buried on Helga's shoulder.

At last the sobs began to subside. "Oh, Helga, I so much want to have my parents with me for real and always! But I don't see how it can ever be," she said.

Helga was thoughtful. "Don't worry about it now, Janty," Helga replied. "Let Papa and I think about it. There's got to be a way."

"But Janty," Helga continued, "no matter what, you've got to promise me something."

"What's that?" JanWoo-Corriboo asked, looking at Helga through tear-stained eyes.

"You've got to teach me how to see creatures with the *Eye Of The All*, like you mentioned. That's a very lovely way to think about it."

"None left out, all beautiful," Janty replied. "That's about all there is to it."

"But it's a life work, you said, didn't you?" Helga observed.

"Yes," Janty replied, "a life's work...But a life's work is a bunch of little details added together. Get enough little details together and you've got a life's work. Pretty simple, eh?" Janty gave Helga a grin with just a hint of mischief in it.

Helga shook her head. This young Fox was something special.

# The Woonyaks Return

Breister's feet hit the stone beach at the bottom of the LuteWoo just as the sun was beginning to penetrate to its depths. He looked up to the opening above him where Helga, Burwell, Bwellina, and Janty waited. He unfastened the rope from around his waist and gave two sharp tugs on the loose end. Helga and Janty pulled it up, to prepare for Helga to descend.

Helga had convinced Janty to allow her and Breister to return with her to the WooPeace. They hoped to meet with WooZan alone so as to not create a sensation in the WooPeace unnecessarily. Breister knew that WooZan came daily to the LuteWoo. Their plan was to be there when she came and talk with her about the possibility of allowing free visiting to and from the WooPeace.

"She's not going to like it," JanWoo-Corriboo declared with conviction. "WooZan is going to blow a cork to find you guys in the LuteWoo when she gets there. Never in recorded history has anyone ever descended through the LuteWoo! Creatures are scared to death of the Fire Beetles that live there."

"But, as you know, and we all can see," Breister observed as he made ready to descend, "there is no multitude of fearsome Fire Beetles here, unless you want to count that centipede over there. I guess if you counted all his legs, that might pass for a multitude!" Everyone laughed, but also realized that what Janty said was true. Although it was clearly open to the outside, for untold generations, no WooSheep had ever tried to enter or leave the WooPeace through the LuteWoo.

"This is the only chance we have to speak with WooZan privately," Helga said. "If we are going to have any chance of getting a hearing from her, we must not confront her before the rest of the WooSheep. There is no other way to get a private moment with her, except to try to meet her here in the LuteWoo."

"But this is also just about the worst place to meet her," JanWoo-Corriboo added worriedly. "This is her place of personal reflection. It's as if we're confronting her in her personal retreat. She's not going to like it."

"I know," Helga agreed, "but how else to get a moment with her? She would like it even less if we showed up at the Common Bowl and started talking to the WooSheep about opening up to the outside!"

“Well,” Helga declared grimly, “we’ll soon know how WooZan will like it. Here goes nothing!” With her pack securely strapped to her back, Helga tied the safety rope around her waist.

Janty and Burwell lowered Helga down to where Breister waited. She unattached herself, tugged twice, and the empty rope shot up out of the LuteWoo. Janty was tying it around her waist, and was about to follow Helga down, when a loud commotion from below caused her and Burwell to halt their activities and draw back away from the edge. Clearly WooZan had arrived, and she was not happy.

“Is it you? The Wood Cow Woonyak, returned?” WooZan screeched. “How dare you return? How dare you drop into the LuteWoo like this? Are you mad? Hunjah!” WooZan calmed herself suddenly, and dropping her voice said in more pleasant tones, “No, I’m sorry. You startled me so badly. This has never happened before. I did not know what to say. I’m sorry I yelled at you. Hunjah!” The hairs on Helga’s neck bristled with caution. She did not trust WooZan.

“Why have you come here?” WooZan asked. “What can this humble servant of the WooPeace do for you? You surely have come for something. You did not plan to come here, where you knew you would find me, if you did not want something from me. What can this humble servant do for you?”

“We have come to ask you to open the WooPeace to regular visiting with outsiders—with creatures from the world above,” Breister replied.

“You don’t know what you are asking,” WooZan said, shaking her head sadly. “The only true peace is in the WooPeace. No, you do not know what you ask. But the WooSheep know. They know that only great evil can come upon us from discontents and rebels like you. You do not know this, but I know this, and the rest of the WooSheep know it, too. Hunjah!”

“Don’t be so sure, WooZan,” Helga replied. “We know many creatures, both in the WooPeace and in the WooSheep Bottoms above, who want the two worlds to come together, or at least open to visits from family.”

“There are no WooSheep above,” WooZan declared. “Only the dead exist in the realm above!”

“But are we dead?” Helga demanded. “We have come from the world above and we are flesh and blood just like you. You don’t deny that, surely?”

“Yes, I know who you are, and why you are here,” WooZan replied with a faint, but noticeable coldness. “It matters not that you are real creatures. You have come to disturb the tranquility of the WooPeace. That is all I need to know. You do not exist. You cannot exist. Hunjah!”

“But, WooZan,” Helga pressed on, “how can you say that something that clearly exists, does not exist? You are a wise and intelligent creature. I see the wonders of what you and all the generations of WooZans have accomplished here. We do not wish to destroy it. We just want creatures to be able to live in both worlds, if they wish.”

“You are a fool!” WooZan replied. “The very fact of your seeming to exist in both worlds will destroy the peace of the WooSheep in both worlds. Both worlds cannot exist. The WooPeace is happy and at peace. I’m sure the WooSheep at the Bottoms have their own type of happiness and peace. So be it. I care not about that. But different happinesses cannot exist together. Such thinking will destroy both. Hunjah!” WooZan’s voice left its traces of friendliness behind and became colder.

“WooZan,” Helga continued her appeal, “there are children separated from their parents...running in hiding to see them. There are grandparents who have never seen their grandchildren. There are creatures that have not seen old and dear friends in many years. There are creatures that have never visited the honored graves of their ancestors. Surely this cannot be the peace and happiness you speak of?”

“The Woonyaks who leave the WooPeace have chosen these things for themselves,” WooZan declared. “We welcome all Woonyaks with open arms and the warmest hospitality we can offer.” WooZan looked at Breister. “This Wood Cow was a Woonyak. Tell her, Woonyak. Tell her how you were received here. Tell her how I pulled your nearly dead body out of the freezing water and gave you life. Tell her how you were saved and welcomed. Tell her these things. Or are you only a traitor and a rebel, who thinks only of himself and what he wants, moment to moment? Tell her how you were saved and welcomed. That will reveal the truth. Hunjah!”

Breister was silent for a moment, pondering what WooZan had said. Then he replied, “WooZan, we have not come to disturb the WooPeace. I think you know that. When you rescued me and cared for me and welcomed me, you did so as creature to creature, as friend to friend. I recall how you gently laid my nearly lifeless body on a soft pallet here in the LuteWoo...on this very spot! I recall your pride as you showed me the WooPeace and introduced me to the Common Bowl. I respect all these things. They were done as one creature to another creature, not as WooZan to Woonyak. We have not come to destroy the creature-to-creature caring and love you showed to me, but to show it to others. Is that wrong? Do you not have brothers and sisters in the other world also?”

WooZan laughed. “So it is worse than I thought,” she said with a

cool smile. “You are not simple fools after all. You do know what you are doing. You have come to consciously re-make the WooPeace according to your own fantastic ideas. Well, you have not the right to do so!” She paused, closing her eyes as if considering what to say next.

“The WooZans of the past have given the WooPeace centuries of undisturbed peace.” WooZan continued. “The WooPeace is still in the hands of the WooZan. I am well able to protect the peace and happiness of the WooSheep. Hunjah! I have no need of your fantastic dreams that the two worlds can ever be one. If you meddle further in the affairs of my creatures, I will have to look at you in the light of rebellion. There will be no ‘creature to creature,’ as you put it. I will act as the WooZan, and do as I must. You will stand before me as a Woonyak rebel, and be judged as you must. Hunjah!”

Helga looked intently at WooZan. She began to see something that she had noticed before, but had not understood. WooZan was looking at the skylights as she spoke. Her eyes never looked at either Breister or Helga. It was as if they were not there and WooZan were talking to herself. This perception sent a chill down Helga’s spine. “WooZan,” she asked, “who lives in the WooPeace? Is it creatures, or some illusion of your own dreams? I see creatures that love and laugh and feel things for each other. I think you see only the ‘WooPeace’—some image you have in your mind. But, I don’t think any creatures live there.” Helga paused and looked directly at WooZan, trying to make contact eye-to-eye. WooZan still did not look at her. She kept her eyes raised past her.

After a few moments, she spoke. “Yes, for many generations, the WooPeace has existed in happiness and peace. Those that live here, live according to the WooPeace, or they do not live here.” Now WooZan lowered her eyes and looked directly at Helga with a cold stare. “You want the two worlds of WooSheep to become one. You think this will make the creatures happy. But then there will be differences and arguments about what the WooPeace is, or should be. The WooPeace will be destroyed if such a thing comes to pass. For centuries, the WooSheep have been assured that they lived in perfect happiness and peace. That has been the doing of the WooZans. Hunjah! You wish to destroy the WooPeace...” WooZan’s voice grew soft and cold. She stepped closer to Helga and looked directly into her eyes for the first time. “And you wish to destroy the WooZans.” She said nothing more, but the cold, intense gleam in her eyes said all that Helga needed to know.

WooZan turned away and walked toward where her boat was beached. “You wish to take away the WooPeace. That is clear,” she said. “So be it. We shall see what the Council of Inquiry has to say. I will summon them. Tomorrow they will give their verdict. If you

agree to wait here until tomorrow afternoon, the Council of Inquiry will decide. Hunjah!" WooZan's voice had an icy edge that made the coolness of the cave seem even colder.

"The Council meets at noon," WooZan explained. "I will return with its decision shortly after noon tomorrow. I will bring you food enough for the night and you will be my guests. Tomorrow you will hear the verdict." WooZan mounted her boat and moved off into the darkness beyond the circle of light at the bottom of the LuteWoo.

"Whoa, that WooZan gives me the creeps," Helga shivered.

"Yeah, and what's this business about the Council of Inquiry?" Breister wondered.

"I don't know," Helga replied, "but I didn't like the way she said it. She'll be back with our food soon, and then we'll try to consult with Janty and the others. We need a plan."

Janty, Burwell, and Bwellina were lying hidden at the top of the LuteWoo, straining to hear what was happening below. Fortunately, sound carried well in the cave and they heard much of what was said. The instant WooZan had left, JanWoo-Corriboo was down the rope in a flash. She had barely hit the ground when she whispered urgently, "Come on, we've got to get you out of here. The Council of Inquiry only has two outcomes: exile or death. WooZan knows you're too dangerous to her precious WooPeace to allow you to go free. You'll be killed!"

"So, the gentle, humble WooZan is not so gentle and humble, eh?" Breister observed. "Some WooPeace!" he said with a hollow laugh.

"Oh, it's gentle and peaceful, all right," Janty said, speaking rapidly with excitement. "If the Council of Inquiry decides someone should die, they are simply blindfolded and conducted deep, deep into the uncharted, deepest parts of the cave system and left there. No one hears from those poor souls ever again. That's exactly what she's got in mind for you! We've got to get you out of here. This was not a good idea!"

"No, Janty, not so fast," Helga replied in a determined voice. "Let me think. We have until tomorrow at least. I have my flicker-pole for protection. If they try to take us, I'll bring every bird within 20 miles in on her head. No, we'll be O.K. We are not going to simply run away. That is probably what she most wants to happen. Either we change our minds and join the WooPeace, or we flee—that's what she hopes. But she did not count on how determined a Wood Cow can be."

Helga now directed Janty with a low whisper: "Go back up and lie low. Let WooZan bring us our food. I don't think she will leave a guard. She wants us to think she's friendly. And she hopes we will flee and leave her little fiefdom alone. I think she'll play it straight with us tonight. But she will surely come back tomorrow with the means to—

shall we say, make us stay a long time?" The friends looked at one another grimly, and then Janty gave two tugs on the rope. Burwell and Bwellina pulled her back up out of the LuteWoo.

After a few more minutes, Breister and Helga heard the soft sound of a boat paddling across the water. WooZan landed shortly and began unloading a hearty picnic of WooSheep delicacies. She was clearly putting out the best the WooPeace had to offer for the campers in the LuteWoo: Salamander Strips with Hot Sauce, Dried Frog Legs and Whizzle Dip, Moss Chips, and Cold Bat Milk Soup.

"I hope you will be happy and comfortable here tonight, my friends," WooZan said in a friendly tone. "I have brought you a delightful picnic and some soft pallets for your comfort. I hope you will ponder the bounties and wonders of the WooPeace," she continued. "You deserve to reflect deeply on why you have come. Perhaps you have come to stay a while? Many who have come have stayed forever. You may change your mind. Hunjah!" She bowed and then paddled off into the darkness.

Helga and Breister waited until all sounds of the boat had died away. Then Helga whispered up towards her friends, "O.K. Let Janty back down."

In a few moments, Janty was at the bottom of the rope. "Whoa, Janty," Helga said, impressed. "I've never seen anyone climb a rope that fast before! You're a very good climber!" Helga praised her with a smile. She was getting the seeds of an idea.

Janty looked at Helga expectantly, awaiting instructions, pulsing with energy. Helga smiled. "Sit down for a moment, Janty," she invited. "You will need every bit of energy you can muster soon. I need a few minutes to think and develop an idea I am having."

Janty crouched down on her haunches, bouncing softly on the balls of her feet, gazing up through the LuteWoo. "You know why this is called the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still?' she asked Breister, who was sitting nearby, also looking up through the skylight.

"No," Breister replied, "but I'd sure like to know. I thought it was because this is an old volcano and the ground used to tremble from that."

"Yes...and no," Janty replied. "The ancient stories tell of the times when the ground trembled here. But the references to the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still' only begin to turn up in the history of our people when the first WooSheep discovered the LuteWoo. They noticed how sitting down here, you see the stars, sun, and moon pass by overhead as if you are moving, but you are not. They were amazed how it felt like movement, but was not. That is where the name came from."

Breister nodded. "Yes, I know that feeling," he agreed. "Isn't it

interesting how being buried deep in solid rock can feel like you are moving. It's a powerful illusion. The WooSheep see this place as a prison."

"Well," Helga interrupted. "I think I've figured out a way to free them from that prison! Here's an idea."

Helga quickly shared her idea, and after a few minutes' consultation she was able to give a final summary of the plan.

"So," she said quickly, "Janty is going door-to-door in the Bottoms. She is going to contact every WooSheep household she can and tell them to gather at the 'Mountain That Moves But Stands Still.' She'll explain to them that she has proven that there are no Venom Bats and that the way is open to visit friends and family in the WooPeace. Not everyone will believe her. Many will think she is crazy or they will still be too scared to come." Helga paused and smiled at her friends. "But, I believe that many will come. There are many creatures who have long thought this whole WooSheep situation was nuts." She grinned at Janty. "I may have been the first to say it out loud, but I'm sure many WooSheep have thought that for a long time. Many will come. Tell them to be here tomorrow morning at sunrise," Helga concluded.

JanWoo-Corriboo drew a deep breath. "And while I am inviting the WooSheep at the Bottoms to come, Burwell and Bwellina will be gathering every scrap of wood and driftwood they can find and piling it near the opening to the LuteWoo," she continued. "When I get back, I will help move the wood and other supplies up and down the rope as quickly as possible." She looked at Helga and Breister with a look of fond appreciation and hope.

"And we will do what Wood Cows do best!" Breister said, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Helga. "We will make the world's sturdiest ladder! We'll make a way for every creature that wants to come meet WooZan to do so!" Breister chuckled. "WooZan will see just how many creatures want to visit friends and relatives in the WooPeace."

Helga smiled, and thought silently to herself, "We hope."

Throughout the day, Janty scurried around the Bottoms inviting the WooSheep to visit the WooPeace, while Burwell and Bwellina carried load after load of tree branches and driftwood to the entrance to the LuteWoo.

As darkness descended, Janty returned. She was tired but encouraged. "I think many of the WooSheep will come," she said excitedly. "Some were doubtful and a few even shut their doors in my face before I finished telling them what was happening. But I could see joy and hope in the faces of many. At least we'd better have that ladder ready!"

The quivering, natural energy that Helga had noticed in JanWoo-

Corriboo from the first time she had seen her was put to good effect throughout the night. Despite running all over the Bottoms delivering invitations, Janty was called upon to make countless trips up and down the ladder delivering materials to Breister and Helga. She worked tirelessly, as did the rest of her determined friends. As they worked through the night, almost without consciousness, a simple song began to rise, first as a tune hummed by Janty, then turning to words sung over and over through the night:

*A family is*
*a circle of friends.*
*Unbroken,*
*let the circle be.*

Using every talent and skill of the Wood Cow traditions, Breister and Helga listened for the qualities of the wood being brought to them. They were greatly encouraged. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard such a chorus of willing woods,” Helga commented joyfully. “It’s as if the entire pile of wood that Burwell and Bwellina has gathered is saying, “Choose me! Use me! I want to be a part of this ladder!”

“Yes,” Breister replied, as he tied stout knots to lash the ladder securely together. “Some of the wood we have is not very pretty and would be discarded by most carpenters. But if the wood is willing, it is the strongest of all, no matter what it looks like.” Wishing to avoid damage to the LuteWoo, and leave no debris behind, Breister and Helga used only rough wood and lashings in their construction. All manner of sizes and shapes were tied together in an amazingly strong, yet very unusual, structure.

The remarkable Wood Cow skills were revealed in a most improbable ladder that grew in length and strength throughout the night. Working in almost complete darkness, Helga stopped repeatedly to play some notes on the pronghorn flute to help her and Breister ‘see’ their surroundings well enough to carry on their work. She wished that she had been a better student when Miss Note was trying to teach her to play so many years ago. “If only I had paid better attention,” Helga thought ruefully. “But, at least I memorized the ‘sounding notes’—so I can use the flute tonight to help us see!” She silently promised herself that, if she ever got the chance to take flute lessons again, she would be more attentive. “If Edna Note could see me now, what would she think!” Helga chuckled.

“I begin to see the ways of the Wood Cows,” JanWoo-Corriboo reflected as she went up and down the rope. “Listening with respect is everything. They listen to the wood. They listen to the rocks. And then these humble materials arise to help them! It’s amazing! Who would

have believed it! The actual carpentry work they do all depends on listening well. If they did not have these ways, this project could not be done. Most creatures would look at what they were doing here tonight and say it was impossible. Yet, they are doing it!" And as she climbed and reflected, the song grew louder and louder in her heart.

*A family is*
*a circle of friends.*
*Unbroken,*
*let the circle be.*

# WooPeace Airlift

The afternoon light was filtering into the LuteWoo when WooZan's boat paddled out of the darkness. As her boat came to the stone bank, she looked with dismay on an amazing sight. Hundreds of WooSheep filled the rocky ledges of the LuteWoo, and a steady stream of Otters, Sheep, Geese, Foxes, and other creatures were still descending the long ladder Breister and Helga had constructed.

So filled with creatures was the LuteWoo, that WooZan found nowhere to land her boat. Paddling her boat as close to the bank as possible, she called for 'the rebel Wood Cows' to come to her.

Helga and Breister stepped through the crowd and addressed WooZan. "You see the creatures that care about creatures in the WooPeace," Helga said. "These are not illusions. They are not images of some perfect picture in your mind. These are real creatures that love and care for real creatures in the WooPeace. That is all they want."

WooZan was livid with anger. She replied with cold fury. "I had hoped you would depart in the night. But you have chosen to remain. The Council of Inquiry has handed down its verdict. You will be conducted—" She stopped speaking abruptly; her eyes fixed on the ladder.

Slowly, carefully, rung-by-rung, a very elderly, wrinkled Sheep was descending. She was looking toward WooZan with kindly eyes. Helga, who had experienced long separation from her parents also could never mistake the meaning of the look. "That is WooZan's mother," Helga breathed, "or I do not know my own feelings." Breister nodded.

WooZan, who had been sitting stiffly in her boat, plunged over the side and half-splashed, half-waded, to the rocky bank. She clambered out of the water and pushed her way through the crowd. The crowd parted to let her pass, staring in astonishment. WooZan reached the base of the ladder just in time to help her mother take the last steps. Gently and with genuine love, WooZan embraced the aged Sheep.

The crowds of WooSheep fell into silence, knowing that they were in the presence of a blessed event. Some minutes passed, as WooZan and her mother embraced and tears flowed freely from both.

At last, WooZan turned and spoke to Helga who was standing nearby. "You have had a lost parent. You know the feelings one has.

But you may not know the feelings one has as a daughter who knows that her mother will die if she stays with her. My mother, MoontZant-Woo, had an illness that no one in the WooPeace could heal. A Woonyak came. He spoke of hot springs that could heal her. I made up a story about her being a rebel and she was sentenced to die, but when I conducted her to the deep caves as is done in such cases, I took her to the exit instead. She understood what I was doing and why. It was the last time I saw her. I never knew if she had lived and been healed until I saw her coming down."

WooZan's fierce, cold manner had now vanished. She looked at the continuing stream of WooSheep descending the ladder. "We have to do something," she smiled at Helga, "there is no more room here for WooSheep. I will call for boats and we will ferry people to the WooPeace. We will have the greatest, most festive Common Bowl in WooPeace memory!"

Burwell, who had been helping WooSheep begin their descent of the ladder, was signaling frantically at Breister and Helga. "What is it, Burwell?" Breister hollered up to him.

"Ask WooZan if we can bring food from the WooSheep Bottoms also," Burwell yelled back. "I've heard about the WooPeace diet...nothing cooked...Salamander Parts...Bat Milk...Frog Guts...Catfish and Moss Sushi...Can't we bring some more food?...Please?" he pleaded in a plaintive voice.

Everyone, including WooZan, laughed heartily. "Well, I guess this is a new day," she replied. "If people are going to be able to come and go as they wish, I guess they should be able to choose what they eat also. Bring on the food from the Bottoms!"

"Helga," Breister commented quietly, "that ladder is never going to be adequate for this. Once creatures in the Bottoms hear about this, they are all going to come running! The ladder won't be able to handle all the traffic, especially if they are all bringing dishes for the feast!" he laughed.

"Well," Helga replied happily, "that's an entirely different problem than we had yesterday! I think I know what we can do."

"I'll play my flicker-pole for just a moment or so. I don't want every bird within 20 miles, of course," she grinned. "I'll play it just long enough to attract the birds, say, within one mile. That ought to do nicely to get helpers for a supplemental airlift!"

Breister looked admiringly at his daughter. "Helga, you never cease to amaze me," he said, shaking his head in bemused respect.

As WooZan set off in her boat to summon other boats to carry the visitors to the WooPeace, Helga began to work her flicker-pole. The characteristic tones filled the cave and wafted up through the LuteWoo. When the first birds began to appear and drop down

through the LuteWoo skylights, Helga stopped. “There, that will be enough, I think,” she observed. “By the time the rest of the birds who were first attracted get here, we’ll have plenty for our airlift.”

One by one the birds arrived, and settled onto perches in the LuteWoo. As they gathered, Helga explained to them what she wanted. They readily agreed. The large birds, such as Eagles, Owls, Geese and Cranes were assigned to carry young beasts down into the LuteWoo, leaving the ladder for adults. The children hooped and hollered as they took the thrilling ride down on the airlift.

The smaller birds—Jays, Robins, Meadowlarks, Woodpeckers, and Sparrows—carried all kinds of packages and parcels containing foods for the feast.

In later years, the ‘WooPeace Airlift’ was one of the most famed events in the common history of the WooSheep clans. But not only because of the wonderful help all the various birds provided. The fame of the WooPeace Airlift also had to do with a certain ‘crazy old Owl’ and his soon-to-be wife...

# New Scenes for Toshty's Painting

After leaving Breister on the sandspit near WooSheep Bottoms, Toshty and Annie paddled for the rest of the day, then Annie asked that they stop for a while. Toshty sensed that something had been bothering her ever since they had left Breister.

Pulling over to the bank, Toshty held on to a bush to keep the canoe from floating downstream. "What do you want, Annie? Shall we stop here for the night?" he asked.

"No, I don't want to rest," Annie replied with a sigh. "I want to turn around and paddle back the way we came."

"Why do you want to do that?" Toshty replied in surprise. "You're not sorry we're going to get married, I hope?"

"Oh, no!" Annie exclaimed happily. "I so want to be married, but...," she paused, then continued, "my heart has been burning since we left Breister. I caused great pain for him and his family. I feel like a hypocrite to do all this mushy talk-talk about 'family is an unbroken circle of friends' when I...Well, when I helped to break his circle!" Annie sighed sorrowfully.

"I can't marry you until I figure out a way to at least say I'm sorry, or do something to help him," Annie concluded.

Toshty looked at Annie with love and pride. "You are a great lady, Annie!" Toshty replied. "I don't know what we can do, but I don't mind delaying our wedding long enough to try to help him...Especially if it will help you to be happy and at peace!" he added.

As they paddled back upstream towards the Bottoms, Toshty and Annie discussed what they could do. Exploring many possibilities, and discarding them one by one, they finally hit upon a plan that felt right. They would go to Toshty's studio in the caves, through which they could secretly enter the WooPeace. Once there, they would try to locate Breister. Annie would give her genuine apology for the pain she had caused and they would offer to help him in any way they could. "Leaving the past behind does not mean leaving wounds unhealed," Annie said. "I'm not going to start a new life with you while this sore I helped create still festers in Breister's life."

"We'll do what we can," Toshty agreed. "How much Breister is able to heal depends on a lot of things we can't control," he added. "But we'll give it our best go...A family is an unbroken circle of friends, and

Breister's in our family now."

They arrived in Toshty's studio and rested there for a while before preparing to proceed further through the cave system to the WooPeace. Just as they were about to leave the studio, Toshty began to act very strangely. As if he had suddenly gone mad, he began to wildly flap his wings and throw himself at the walls of his studio, as if trying to fly through the stone wall!

"Toshty!" Annie screamed, "What are you doing? Have you gone mad? What's the matter?"

Toshty did not respond, but simply threw himself more and more frantically against the walls. Feathers flew as Toshty wildly flapped his wings like a bird possessed by some wild spirit. "AWWK! OOOFFT! SQWAAAK! OOOFFPT! OOOO!" Toshty, battered and spent, covered with broken feathers, sank to the floor in dazed frustration. "Oooohh..." he groaned, rubbing his battered head. "What a terrible time for the 'help bugle' to sound!"

"The help bugle?" Annie asked.

Rubbing his head, Toshty got to his feet and prepared to throw himself at the rock walls once again. "It's an irresistible call for help and all birds by nature respond. Whenever the bugle sounds, any bird that hears has got to go. It's a sacred duty. It's just like a switch is thrown in a bird's brain...Ooops! I'm talking too much, gotta go!"

Zoom! Crash! "OOOFT!"

Annie turned her eyes away. The sight of her beloved Toshty battering himself against the solid rock walls was too painful to watch. Slumping down against the wall, she felt dejected and sad. "What a wedding party this has turned out to be!" she groaned. "Toshty will be lucky to walk away from this with his brains intact. I'll have a husband capable of only vacant looks for the rest of his life. I've got to do something. Maybe I have some rope in my pack...I'll tackle him and tie him up until this madness passes." She rummaged frantically in her old, battered bandit's pack looking for some rope.

"Where are things when you need them?" she muttered. "Moldy bandit's mush, Grizzly Bear Army knife, clothes, maps, bits of biscuits, flash gourd, scissors...Flash gourd!" Annie howled with glee. "Yeowzer! I forgot I had this! This is just what the doctor ordered!" she exulted. "This is one time that knowing a little something about explosives will come in handy...I've gotta hurry though...That dazed and vacant look will be in Toshty's eyes permanently if I don't do something to get him where he wants to go!"

"Hmmm...," she mused, surveying the studio. "Gotta be careful. Don't want to blow up Toshty's life work! Let's see...there's got to be a good place for this." Looking around the studio quickly, Annie located a small, deep crevice leading in the direction Toshty apparently

wanted to go. She carefully packed the flash gourd as deep in the crack as possible, letting the long fuse hang back out in the studio. Then she took rags that Toshty had for cleaning up his paint brushes and stuffed them in the crack behind the flash gourd, packing it in securely. “I want the main force of the blast to go the other direction,” she said to herself. “Please let the blast blow the other way!”

Lighting the fuse, Annie rushed at Toshty and hurtled him to the floor just as the flash gourd detonated. KA-BOOOOM! The studio shuddered and shook, dust and small pebbles showering down on them. Annie lifted her head and looked around. Toshty’s paintings were intact! There was a huge, jagged hole torn in the wall where the flash gourd had been lodged.

Annie could see a crowd of creatures standing on the other side of a lake looking at her in amazement. The blast had ripped a hole through to the LuteWoo, but the lake had buffered the creatures from the blast debris!

As Annie and Toshty stepped through the new opening to survey what was happening in the LuteWoo, the slanting afternoon rays of the sun, streaming through the skylights fell on Toshty’s painting of the history of the WooSheep. The colors were brilliant in the sun. Annie and Toshty, as they watched the amazing scene unfolding in the WooPeace, sensed that new scenes would need to be added to the painting.

# Shipwrecked Sea-beasts

The feast in the WooPeace on that memorable occasion was an epic of unlimited digestion. A world changed for the better, and the wild joy that came as a result, made beasts daring enough to try strange food and drink. Cheerful courage and curiosity led many a beast to sample delicacies they would have once despised as the product of savage cooks and hateful kitchens. More than a few were so besotted with the pleasant chaos that they cared not whether they liked what was set before them. Like many a fool or famished wanderer, they liked anything that touched their lips.

Beasts of both persuasions—of the WooPeace and of WooSheep Bottoms—were generous and praised each other's provisions till the casks ran dry and the victuals were gone. There were Cave Crabs, black and orange; the black ones packed with eggs that, when tossed in sizzling oil, popped up into crunchy, toasted orbs three-times their size, that even Burwell greedily devoured. And more than Burwell were surprised to discover that Cave Bat Tongues Sautéed in Lizard Fat made a dish fit for the finest table.

The Armadillo Pie in the Shell contributed by the WooSheep was judged by all to be very good eating; and some thought their Rattlesnake Fillets worth dying for, especially when drizzled with spicy Pear Salsa. But the Buff-Jacket Tarts—dried sour cherries, tart apples, rose hips, and honey mashed into a lump, then boiled in a bag, and the juice squeezed out for a tangy drink, before the mash was baked inside flaky, melt-in-your-mouth pastry—those were Helga's favorite.

A good feast requires good drink and the sparkling Phillup Phizz made from strawberries and apriot nectar was so deliciously sweet and plentiful that many beasts "grew fat simply by smelling it," as Breister put it. But Burwell, true to himself, preferred the bubbly Lamb's Wool Sparkle—mashed carrots mixed with apple cider and sparkling water—soft and smooth, but full of fizz.

As the day passed and light began to fail in the LuteWoo, the glorious celebration gradually finished with the beasts swapping yarns while sucking on hard dark chocolate nuggets. The delectable sweet nuggets, rock hard and too solid to chew, took nearly an hour to melt away in the mouth. Stuffed silly and tired out, a contented happiness

settled over the feasters. On all sides, beasts of all shapes, sizes, and ages—young and old, male and female, large and small, gathered to share final farewells as the celebration began to break up. Spontaneously, as if by some unseen signal, the beasts gathered around Helga—all knew that she was the root of the great change that had occurred and, beyond that, the first stranger to walk willingly into the WooPeace in living memory!

Almost without a conscious thought, the simple song began to rise again, the words sung with a simple, heartfelt pleasure that was a fitting dessert for the feast:

*A family is*
*a circle of friends.*
*Unbroken,*
*let the circle be.*

The song drew long-separated hearts closer together, like scattered iron filings clinging to a magnet. Then the celebrators gradually began to go home or pitch in on the clean up. Late into the night, the spirit of unity kept tired beasts working together, helping the WooSheep depart and cleaning up the remains of the feast. Amidst the crush of beasts coming and going, Helga and Breister did not work together, each picking up whatever needed to be done. Helga, in fact, worked side by side with Janty, her tiredness having no effect on her happiness as she enjoyed every moment with her new friend.

As the clean-up operations ended, Helga found her father and told him that she was going to walk Janty back to WooSheep Bottoms. “The night will be nearly over by the time we get to the Bottoms,” she said, “so I’ll catch some sleep at Janty’s place, then meet you at Toshty’s cabin tomorrow afternoon.” Breister agreed and Helga climbed the ladder out of the LuteWoo with Janty.

Soon after, Breister dragged his own weary body up the ladder and made his way back to Toshty’s cabin. With a brief greeting and good night to Toshty and Annie, Breister tumbled into bed and fell into a deep exhausted sleep.

The sun was already well up in the sky when Breister awoke. Slowly waking, he lay quietly for a while, just enjoying the soft morning light and cool breeze blowing in through the window. Gradually rousing himself, Breister pulled on his clothes and wandered out of his room, looking for Toshty and Annie.

He found them sitting at the hearth drinking coffee. Upon seeing Breister, Toshty came to him and said, “Here’s something you’ll like to see.” Smiling gently, but with a look of sadness, Toshty handed Breister a neatly folded piece of paper. “This message arrived from

WooSheep Bottoms via Courier Hawk a little while ago."

Breister read the message, which ran:

*Beloved father,*

*I am sorry to miss my meeting with you. But I am leaving WooSheep Bottoms in haste because a most unusual encounter left me no choice. Going back to the Bottoms after we left you last night, we took a shortcut through a place locals call Scurryvaig Haunt, because alot of strange wanderers and beasts from foreign lands roam through there. Not far away, Dismal Pass leads through the mountains to the Great Sea and many a vagabond comes through there. Anyway, there we met a Seabird who says he saw a ship in great trouble as he flew along the coast.*

*The ship was run aground and badly damaged, but the Seabird does not know much else about it, except that the crew will be in great danger from Wrackshees. I must help them if I can. They will need a good carpenter and I would do anything to prevent them being taken by Wrackshees. There is no time to waste. I must go quickly if I am to make a difference. Do not worry. I will return soon. Toshty won't mind you resting there at his cabin until I get back.*

*When I return, we can go on to the Rounds as we plan—I can't wait to see my friends there again. But, first, my conscience calls me to help these unfortunate sea-beasts. I know what danger they are in.*

*So, you see how it is. I feel heartsick to leave you and I hope that you understand. I almost fear that I love you so well that I will not be able to do what justice demands me to do—*

*I shall say no more to worry you, adding only that I send you my love and the promise to see you soon.*

*I will always be,*

*Your most affectionate,*

*Helga*

Finishing the letter, Breister folded it carefully and gave it back to Toshty. "Helga does not love so much that love blinds her to justice; nor hate injustice so deeply to be blinded to kindness. Yes, my daughter wrote that letter."

Smiling at Toshty and Annie, Breister shook his head and continued, "I trust Helga and will allow her to do as she wishes with this—as if there were a thing I could do to stop her! But I'll not leave her to face this danger alone and another carpenter will speed up the repairs. I will head across Dismal Pass myself and help her."

"Annie and I will go with you!" Toshty cried. "We are brave beasts

and," he paused, smiling at his beloved Cougar, "Annie knows a thing or two about the ways of rogues and bandits! We are in this with you!"

"Yes," Annie said, "we are in this with you. We are now an unbroken circle of friends."

*Book Three*
# Tokens of Unseen Realms

## Wrackshees at the Outer Rings

"Crinoo! Zarr!" Red Whale cursed as a grim smile spread across his face. The dawn streaking the horizon cast a pale red glow, dimly revealing an ugly scene. Shattered masts, ruined sails, and tangled webs of riggings covered the deck of the old seafarer's once impressive ship, *Daring Dream*. The ship had been virtually shaved clean of its masts and sails—as if a huge blade had sliced them off. Although the sturdy ship had survived battering from a ferocious storm during the night, Red Whale was left with little more than a raft. The complete wreckage of *Daring Dream,* however, could not deter his labored journey toward the prow. Despite the nearly mountainous obstacles, he climbed rapidly over the debris-strewn deck.

The dismal wreckage of his storm-battered vessel was of little interest to him now. Far away to the west, the magnificent starry sky —clear as the wind pushed the clouds off to the east—abruptly ended in a long jagged line that here and there soared skyward at sharp angles. Land! The outline of a landmass was unmistakable as a blank in the otherwise brilliant night heavens.

"Thar't! Can ya see it, Fishbum? It be's the Outer Rings! Sure 'n it can't be none else!" Fishbum, the young Ship's Lookout standing beside Red Whale, felt a brief tremble of fear ripple through his body. The dim outline of an island was, indeed, unmistakable against the remains of the starry night sky. Cap't Red Whale's happy excitement was understandable. It was what Red Whale did not see that sent shivers down Fishbum's spine. Dozens of small boats propelled by hundreds of paddles rising and falling in a steady, urgent rhythm, were also faintly visible to Fishbum's bleary, peering gaze. He sensed that the boats, soundlessly bearing down on *Daring Dream,* were not

making a friendly visit. The high speed and silence of the approach, advancing in the dim light of early dawn, indicated a desire for surprise.

Although Fishbum feared an approaching attack, Captain "Red Whale" Gumberpott still gazed excitedly toward the horizon, seemingly oblivious to the boats. His tightly drawn face, however, belied worry that tinged his excitement. As he lumbered toward the prow, the flowing rolls of flab overhanging his belt rose and fell in rhythm with his heavy breathing. Between gasps of air, he spoke in a broken chain of frenzied commands:

"Crinoo! The Outer Rings...Zarr! They're not real they said, but Lord Farseeker knew...Sharat! V'last that storming wild Ogress! I thought we'd escaped it. Unless we make land, we'll be goners...not much fresh water left...V'last!"

Reaching the prow, Red Whale suddenly lunged toward the railing. Fishbum, fearing that Red Whale meant to dive over the side, grabbed at the captain's coat. Pulling with all his strength, Fishbum slowed, but could not stop Red Whale's advance. The captain's massive belly squashed across the railing. Stopping with his body pitched halfway over the railing, Red Whale's ranting subsided into an occasional muttered oath.

Abnormally tall and massive in girth, the giant Wolf had deep, bloodshot eyes. His strong bristly beard, dried to a scrub-brush finish, told of long weathering at sea. Leaning now, as far out over the railing as he could without falling over, he seemed to be straining, peering, frantic to see the island more clearly. "Mor'light! Mor'light! V'last the sun! Mor! Mor'light! I must see the Outer Rings! Sure 'n the Outer Rings be within my grasp!"

Red Whale seemingly took no note of the horde of boats drawing closer. Fishbum nervously realized that his nearly blind captain perhaps did not yet see them in the still dim light. Long years spent peering at faded charts by candlelight had robbed Red Whale of much his sight. He could see well enough to make out the dark bulky profile of a landmass against the brilliant sky, but could not yet make out the small dark boats fast approaching across a still dark sea.

"Fishbum, why are you sittin' and waitin' like a boot full o' water? That's Wrackshee boats comin' hard at us or I'll be fooled! Now, look lively, you! Push me over the side, then you follow! Quick like now! Be about it!" Red Whale puffed as the lumbered up over the rail, Fishbum pushing him at the rear. He paused just before plunging into the sea below. "Well, Mate, the only hope is for us to go over the side. Savin' ourselves is the hope the others might have. If them swarming Wrackshees aim to take us, there be no hope for any of us if we stay here."

# Into the Voi-Nil

When Norayn “Red Whale” Gumberpott set sail six months before in search of the Outer Rings, he bore a royal commission from the Lord Lynx Farseeker. A Voyager Wolf at the Court of the Lord Lynx, Red Whale knew the legends of the Outer Rings—said to be numberless islands somewhere along the unexplored fringes of the Great Sea. Most scoffed at stories about the islands and the fabulous riches they were said to contain. Lord Farseeker, however, was not a scoffer.

The Lord Lynx was a listener, a quester, a hoper—a lover of what might be. His eye forever looked toward the far horizon. He surrounded himself with chart makers, ship captains, astronomers, and storytellers; anyone who had something new to say about the Voi-Nil—the vast blank spaces on his charts. “Far better to listen to a storyteller with a gleam in his eye, even though he be a liar, than to a fool who has never had an idea!” he would say. There was nothing to rival the Lord Farseeker’s capacity to listen to the stories of explorers and adventurers who had ventured past the edge of the known lands.

He delighted in the accounts of brave explorers who pushed back the edges of the Voi-Nil. Many an explorer had spent a pleasant evening in the witty and stimulating company of Lord Farseeker, awash in Devil’s Stout Cheer and surrounded by heaping plates of Blaze-Fired Pike, Nine-Chocolate Tortes, and crispy Pecan Frits. The Lynx Lord had no equal as a lively host, but his greatest reputation came as a recorder of adventurer’s tales. New discoveries, wild tales of sea monsters and fantastic lands, guesses as to what might lie deeper within the Voi-Nil—nothing was excluded from the conversation, scribes noting down every word. Many a night the lamps burned late in Lord Farseeker’s quarters as he studied recent reports and pondered new guesses about the Voi-Nil.

When Lord Farseeker found another creature with the spirit of a quester, hoper, and lover of what might be—Ah, delight! And in Norayn Gumberpott he had long nurtured such a yearning adventurer. Born aboard ship, son of the legendary Admiral Salt Wolf Mis’treen and her husband Sir Master Long Arms Gumberpott, Norayn was true stock of his parents. Active, restless, and resolute, he was filled with an irresistible thirst for adventure. For twenty-five years he had sailed

with his parents on the great trading galley, *Velvet Bird,* learning the ways of the sea. Sailing on some of the most celebrated voyages recorded in Lord Farseeker's annals, he traveled all the known seas first as a rising sea-beast, then for thirty years as master of his own ship. Sailing the most difficult seas, he honed his seafaring skills and learned the ways of many lands. When Lord Farseeker was ready to send explorers deep into the Voi-Nil—seeking the Outer Rings—the burly, mountain-sized Wolf was perfectly suited to command the voyage.

On that fateful day, which, in the end would spell the doom of Lord Farseeker's realm—and bring many more untidy disturbances to lands and beasts far distant—no hint of future perils was present. A brilliant sun laid a carpet of dazzling diamonds across the calm sea. Favorable breezes softly ruffled the sails of the *Daring Dream*—the fine ship Lord Farseeker had fitted out for Norayn's command.

Standing beside the dock, watching Captain Gumberpott giving final orders to make the *Daring Dream* ready for departure, Lord Farseeker exulted. The spirit of quest shining in his captain's face was exactly what was needed: noble, loyal, and honorable—yet with the gleam of an old sea-salt's devil-may-care courage. The Lord Lynx knew that his captain would not turn back at the first sign of trouble.

Indeed, if ever there was an explorer born for Lord Farseeker's task, it was Red Whale. His success in recruiting a crew for the *Daring Dream* was itself proof of this. Red Whale knew that no sea-beast was anxious to sail into the Voi-Nil, what with horrific tales being all that was known of it. He had heard many such a story: "Ay't! Only a fool would sail into the Voi-Nil. It's naught but death for a sea-beast. Giant, hideous sea-serpents lurk there—and they's suck the pegs right out of the hulls of ships! Then they's suck the boots and clothes right off any poor sailor as tries to swim for his life. Then they's slowly suck that poor sailor straight down their throats like a screaming piece of noodle—that is, if that poor, wretched soul ain't dead of fright already! That be the Voi-Nil."

But Red Whale had told a different tale in the weeks before *Daring Dream* cast off for its voyage. Echoing through the taverns and scrogging halls his laughter crackled with the love for adventure and the thrill of new lands to be discovered. "Now hear me out you weak-gutted, flea-picking, slobber-sippers!" he laughed when sailors fearfully spoke of the Voi-Nil—of sea monsters or places where the ocean burned with fire.

"Did you ever taste the honey-sweet Wizta Melon?" he asked. "Or scoop the luscious meat out of the tail of a roasted Glazonga Lizard? Or drink Lime Crème from an ice cup fresh made just for you? Then come along with me. Or if you like cold snake guts and watery gruel,

stay here. Looking around, I see lots of sailors with nothing to do—how many days of snake guts and gruel before you get a ship again? Come with me! I'm going where there's languages you never heard. Places you never saw. Wonders you never dreamed of. And maybe riches you can't have any other way! So, says I, come along with me!"

And so it went in the weeks before *Daring Dream* set sail. Each morning, even as the damp night fog still swirled in the alleyways and docks, Red Whale was at his work. Searching the narrow streets and taverns for a crew, he swilled bubbly Spark 'n Pots with likely sea-beasts, tossed blazing hot scrog pins by the dozen to leave no doubt of his fearlessness, and cheered new recruits with coins the Lord Lynx provided for the purpose. No one could miss Red Whale as he went about his recruiting. Every sea-beast's hangout rang with his roaring good humor and even the most seasoned sea-beast took note of his outlandish dress.

Going about like a gilded sovereign, the massive bearded Wolf, sea-weathered and sun-bronzed, bedecked with fabulous jewelry and fine silks, used all his swagger to impress potential crew. Leaving nothing to chance, the Lord Farseeker fitted out a sturdy ship, provisioned it well, and gave Captain Gumberpott worthy means to attract a favorable crew. And it worked. Common sea-beasts and tough old salts readily signed on to sail aboard *Daring Dream.*

Seeker's Keep, the fine port of Lord Farseeker's realm, had long been a magnet for all sorts of seafarers. "Every beast in Seeker's Keep is either a sea-beast, or a landlubber disguised as one!"—so the saying went. Dashing swashbucklers and humble fisher-beasts, roguish rebels and fine-mannered merchants. Any beast with an interest in the sea found his way to Seeker's Keep at one time of another. And this explosion of sea-beast flavors suited Lord Farseeker's plans very well. Seeker's Keep was a marvelous place to recruit a crew—with the proper means.

Giving Red Whale a velvet bag full of heavy gold earrings, the Lord Lynx said, "*Daring Dream* is a ship of promise. Every beast aboard must be a seeker of good fortunes—but a ship has only hopes until good fortune is found. Hang one gold ring in the ear of every one of your crew. That will be my own good fortune going with each beast until he finds his own."

With such terms and tactics Red Whale attracted a worthy crew. But more than swagger, coins and rings, and promise of adventure, Captain Gumberpott knew his sea-beasts. He knew what they loved and what they feared. He knew what they wanted in a captain and in a ship. He was a sea-beast's captain—brave, wise, smart, and fair to every crew beast.

On the day *Daring Dream* set sail, the instructions given by Captain

Gumberpott to his crew said it all: “Aboard this ship all beasts serve alike in both All’s-Well and danger, and all take the watch in fair wind and foul. No other port than we all reach it together. Pull our oars hard for each other, trim our sails to preserve each of us. After this, good food and drink, be careful with fire, and keep only to good rogues. But first and last be this: every ship’s beast deserves to live another day—I’ll not be waste’n my crew on fool’s chances!”

On the 3rd day after the summer calms ended and the fall fair winds returned, Lord Farseeker gave Captain Gumberpott his commission, “Aright it is and so you are ordered,” he said, “to voyage across the Great Sea in search of the Outer Rings, and there to trade with every kind of creature you may find, provided only you keep an exact journal of your voyage, giving full and accurate account of all you learn and discover, and bring hither the tenth part of the whole of whatever value you may glean.”

That Red Whale Gumberpott and *Daring Dream* would never be heard from again along that dock, nor in the taverns and scrogging halls, was then a story unknown. Now it begins.

# Ice Fall Narrows

The last bit of land shown on Lord Farseeker's maps before the Voi-Nil was a considerable, but barely noted, rugged island called Ice Fall Narrows. Uninhabited, except for a clan of hardy Otters who had discovered the island long ago, and stayed to make a life raising vegetables and smoking fish, it lay two month's sailing from Seeker's Keep.

Two months is a long time without landfall. Fresh water gone. Provisions wormy. Tempers ragged. To sail beyond two months without seeing land, sea-beasts must be strongly determined and suffer much. With years of sailing unknown seas under his belt and particular experience sailing the edge of the Voi-Nil, Red Whale was able to calm the mounting fears of his crew. "Look here mates, we're a ship of lucky beasts. I've been to Ice Fall Narrows and we won't be long getting there now. Two more good days of favoring winds and we'll be seeing the ice cap of Smoking Bill." Smoking Bill, a long-silent volcano that rose up from the sea, forming the island, trailed a perpetual cloud of steam from its summit. Rising several thousand feet above the sea, a snow and ice field forever covered Smoking Bill's upper heights.

"Now, the first beast as sees Smoking Bill and sings out, 'Land!'—that beast will be the first one ashore when we drop anchor," Red Whale continued. The crew hardly slept after that. Off duty sea-beasts crowded the rails, each wanting to be the first to sight Smoking Bill.

Sixty-three days into the voyage, *Daring Dream* was plowing forward under full sail when Katteo Jor'Dane sang out the long-awaited cry: "Land! Smoke three points off starboard!" "Aye, Cap't—Smokin' Bill just comin' up over the horizon!" yelled Smits Howler from his lookout platform far up on the mast.

A tumult of cheers and shouts broke out. "Huzzay! Aye'Mate! Halloo!" The ship's musicians struck up all instruments—trumpets, tin drums, cymbals, and bagpipes. Red Whale, meanwhile, seemed uninterested in the jubilant celebration. Pulling a small spyglass from his coat pocket, he put it to his eye and scanned the horizon. For some minutes he continued to gaze through his telescope, moving it back and forth as he inspected various points on the horizon.

At last, satisfied that the identification of the long-anticipated

island was correct, Captain Gumberpott lowered the spyglass. Slipping it back in his pocket, he turned to Fishbum. Shouting to be heard above the blaring, honking, clanging and yelling, Red Whale yelled in Fishbum's ear: "Get a flash gourd from the explosives case and bring it up here. Be quick about it."

Doing as he was told, Fishbum ran off and soon returned carrying one of the small gourds packed with highly-explosive grain dust. He handed it to Red Whale who, with a hearty chuckle, lit the fuse and watched it burn, smoking in his hand for several seconds. Then he drew back his arm and tossed the flash gourd with all his strength far out over the water. Fishbum and Red Whale watched the smoking fuse trace a long curving arc across the sky.

KA-BOOM! The deafening explosion set up a huge geyser of water that sprayed back across the deck. The crew's celebration stopped instantly, all eyes turned to Red Whale. "There," the captain began, "thank you for accepting my pleasant little invitation to pay attention! Listen well! Stop acting like landlubber shopkeepers who've drunk too much coffee! We've got serious business ahead! That will be all the partying for now. We're not safe to the harbor yet. We have some real sweating to do—all paws to your oar posts! The current will tear us to pieces if we're not about our wits!"

The crew scattered quickly to their tasks. Pulling in the sails and securing them, opening the oar ports, and extending the long oars, they readied the ship to move under its own power. As the crew did their work, Red Whale explained the situation to Fishbum. "The first sight of Smokin' Bill means we're about to be in the grip of the Keel-Ripper. The Keel-Ripper is a tremendous, powerful current that runs on this side of Ice Fall Narrows. It runs like a mad beast right past the island. We can't fight it. Once the Keel-Ripper takes us, we only choose which way it carries us. She'll be hurling us through a string of rocks and reefs if we don't have our wits with us! Here, mate, take the glass and have a look."

Red Whale handed Fishbum his spyglass. The Lynx surveyed the sea that lay ahead. Frothing ripples clearly showed where the water surged at high speed across long stretches of rocky reefs. Fishbum did not need much imagination to picture the extreme danger they were facing.

"Now, we won't be goin' that way, mate. The reef's sure destruction for us. Tryin' to weave through the line of reefs—why, the Keel-Ripper'll just skip us like a stone across the rocks...septin' *Daring Dream* won't skip none too good. We'd be torn to pieces in a wink."

He paused for a moment, then clapped Fishbum on the shoulder and continued in a jovial tone. "But, we have a choice, mate. We can't trust the winds, but rowin' we have a chance of controlling the way

the current carries us. With strong backs to the oars and a tiny bit of good luck, the Keel-Ripper'll be throw'n us right through the Narrows to safe harbor. Just before the line of reefs begins, the current splits—one stream goin' through the reefs, and the other pushing through the Narrows. Ride it through the Narrows and we hit the safe, deep bay on the other side. There's a fine snug harbor there." Having piloted through the Narrows before, Red Whale knew that working with the powerful tide was both highly dangerous and the only hope of safety. Using oars to keep the ship at the center of the surging current and steering with great care, the Keel-Ripper would push the ship safely through the Narrows to the other side of the island.

The captain had hardly finished speaking, when the ship lurched as if a mighty beast had grabbed it. "Pull on the oars—Now!" Red Whale yelled as the ship lurched, broadsided by the powerful current. "Row lively now, mates! We'll be caught on the reefs if we don't work it well! Row as if all and forever depended on it. Hard to the oars! Hard as ya can!"

Approaching the line of reefs, the frenzied crew below deck pulled at the oars. Captain Gumberpott, turning the wheel slightly, steered the ship down the narrow passage separating the line of reefs from the rugged coastline studded with rocks. Everywhere, sharp rocks and precipitous cliffs promised to dash a poorly piloted ship to pieces.

At the south end, the island was bisected by a narrow sea passage —the Ice Fall Narrows which gave the island its name. Some long ago earthquake had ripped the island in two. Only a narrow passage existed, barely twice the width of *Daring Dream* in a few places, but sufficient to pass safely with a wise pilot at the wheel. "Fight the Keel-Ripper and she will kill you," Red Whale explained to Fishbum. "But ride with her and she will pull you through the Narrows—but even none of us can stop the Ice Fall if that be our fate!"

As *Daring Dream* slipped into the Narrows, sheer cliffs of rock, immensely high, could be seen rising ahead on both sides. Long runs of glacier ice could be seen, running up the side of Smoking Bill's peak.

"Ayet, mates! Take a good look at the sky—that'll be the last you see of it and Smokin' Bill until we pop out the other side of the Narrows. We'll be seein' nothin' but rocks, water, and fog for now."

As the ship drew further and further into the Narrows, Red Whale commanded that all non-essential crew go below deck and close every possible hatch. "We'll be crossing near the Ice Fall soon, and best for beasts to be below. Anyone on deck will be soaked with freezing water." Halfway through the Narrows, a river flowing down off of Smoking Bill poured over the sheer, jagged, treeless cliff. The powerful fall of the river over time had eroded the far side of the

Narrows, giving a wider passage for *Daring Dream.* Hugging the far wall of the Narrows, a ship could avoid the main force of the river falling into the sea-passage. But being fed by glaciers on the flanks of Smoking Bill, chunks of ice often were also carried over the falls. Sometimes the chunks were huge—the size of a rowboat or sometimes larger. When this "Ice Fall" occurred, it could easily destroy a ship. There was no telling what might be falling at any particular time.

Captain Gumberpott did not move or hesitate. "Fishbum," he ordered, "get the moggets on. Here we go!" Fishbum and the few other crew-beasts left on deck quickly pulled on their moggets—waterproof lizard skin coats. Red Whale slightly turned the wheel to alter the course, pulling *Daring Dream* as wide as possible from the falling water. Below decks, two crew-beasts labored at every oar—twenty on each side of *Daring Dream*—to gently move the ship with the current. And with Captain Gumberpott's experienced paw on the wheel, *Daring Dream* edged its way through a hideous graveyard of ships. The ghostly remains of smashed ships lay scattered around the waterfall, the ghastly ribs of keels poking up like great dead monsters.

Where the warm sea current mingled with the icy water coming off the mountain, thick fogs settled over the Narrows. Gloomy, swirling fog seemed to merge seamlessly with the gray water of the Narrows. Occasionally, a shaft of sunlight, pierced through a breech in the steep canyon walls and briefly lightened the lead-gray mist. But for the most part, Red Whale could barely see from one end of the ship to the other. Fishbum and several other sea-beasts, stationed at points along the ship's railing on all sides, peered into the fog, calling out warnings to guide Red Whale at the wheel: "Rocks to port—ten degrees starboard!"

As *Daring Dream* gradually worked her way deeper and deeper into the Narrows, the approach to the Ice Fall brought the booming echoes of huge chunks of ice falling into the water. Countless chunks of ice, some as large as a whale, others small as watermelon, now bobbed everywhere around the ship. The eerie sound of falling ice tested every nerve and often sent everyone by Red Whale scurrying for cover. SPLING! A box-sized piece of ice bounced off the side of *Daring Dream,* smashing two sets of oars. CRASH-SPLOOSH! A larger chunk broke off the bowsprit. CLINK-SPLINK-SPLING! A shower of chunks splattered the deck, one missing Red Whale only by inches. But the shower of ice chunks was even worse closer to the waterfall—WHA-SPLOOSH! A massive chunk sent up a geyser. Spray doused the *Daring Dream's* deck.

"Crinoo! Hard on the oars, mates!" Red Whale yelled. "Pull for all you're worth! Another twenty strokes and we'll be clear of the fallin' ice! Pull! Pull! Pull!"

WHA-SPLOOSH! Below decks the whole crew threw its muscles to the oars. Puffing and wheezing as they pulled, half suffocated in the stale air of beasts sweating and blowing, even the most seasoned felt sick as the ship tossed helter-skelter. Squalid air, seasickness, and fear all blended together as every beast frantically pulled to keep the ship out of the main path of the falling ice.

Frothing seawater splashed in through the long tear in the hull where the oar ports had been destroyed. Injured oar-beasts sloshed and stumbled toward the stairway to the upper deck calling for Banjo Saw, the ship's doctor. Heeding the call of necessity, several beasts abandoned their oars and began working the manual pumps. Tense minutes passed. The creaking and groaning of the ship's timbers had never seemed so fearsome.

The sound of puffing and gasping oar-beasts and of oars rattling feverishly in their ports gradually overpowered the fading thunder of the waterfall and falling ice. After another several minutes of frantic rowing and pumping, a pleasant melody began to drown out the fading boom of falling ice—the rolling, soft crash of waves on a sandy beach. Narrows End Bay!

Narrows End Bay, opening wide on the far side of the island, offered *Daring Dream* a welcoming calm. Snug and deep, the harbor was big enough for a hundred ships, but was hardly ever visited. Few sea-beasts knew it as more than a speck on their charts, and fewer still wished to voyage to the very edge of the Voi-Nil.

For a crew that has been imprisoned on ship for 63 days, an empty harbor is still a harbor. As soon as *Daring Dream* dropped anchor, Nail-n-Peg Saloo, the ship's carpenter took three beasts over the side to repair the gash in the hull. It would be two day's tidy work to close the hole, and three more days to replace the bowsprit. Add on the needs of hauling fresh water and provisions, and the crew would be at least a week at the Narrows End Bay.

Katteo Jor'Dane, having been the first to sight land, rode happily in the prow of the first longboat sent ashore. Other longboats followed, crowded with red-faced Otters from the plains of Atalyety; and tall, proud-eyed Hares from the jungles of Heepkatadoo; and Lisstecars—richly bearded Coyotes loaded down with daggers of every description. And, as with any crew, there were the bewildered, young crew-beasts staring at everything around them, as if they had suddenly discovered astonishment. Soon all the crew, except the feverishly working repair team, was ashore.

Striking the beach in the first longboat, Captain Gumberpott greeted his old friend, Winja Selamí, the craggy old chief of the small Knot of Otters settled on Narrows End Bay. "Winja, you old weather!" Red Whale greeted his friend. "How blows the Fair Temps for you?"

“Since the third day last,” Winja replied, “the Fair Temps[3] are steady and mild. That means likely a fair blow to the west, but a Scowling Mally[4] brewing to the south. Which way are you bound?”

“Why, we be bound for a merry mug and pot of stew, of course!” Red Whale laughed. “A few sips of Sea Brew would be a mighty fine thing just now.”

“Ay’t—a welcoming mug o’ cheer and good vittles are, indeed, the sea-beasts best harbor!” Winja chuckled. “Come on and join us for a pint o’ Sea Brew and some vittles to shake up your gut a bit. I’m just off to join the rest of the Knot over at Flummo O’Marrell’s place. There’s a feast tonight for a young beast washed up on the shore a few weeks ago—cast overboard, far off-shore, by a Rummer Boar passing by. You know the Rummers—a fiercesome cruel batch of freebooters. As a wee Wolf, Bem was stolen from her bed one night—taken by Wrackshees, then sold to Rummers to replace deserters in their crew. She fell into life on the ship and became the Pilot. Gradually, however, the horror of the Rumming raids turned her heart against that life. She tried to mount a mutiny and take over the ship, but failed. The Rummer Boar—a particularly bad fellow, Sabre Tusk d’Newolf—threw her into the freezing water. He thought that was the end of Bem. And nearly was. When she washed up in the Bay, we didn’t know if she’d pull through at first—nearly drowned, cold to the point of being blue, badly cut and bruised, half-raving mad with fever. But with kindly attention she gradually came to herself and healed. So come on along—today we celebrate her recovery. All of us are meeting at Flummo’s to prepare for the celebration. You must join us.”

Captain Gumberpott and his crew followed their host as he plunged off along a trail leading back through the rocks, sand dunes, and trees that ringed the wide sandy beach. Lazy curls of smoke drifted up to the sky a short distance off among the rocks. Sounds of music, laughter, and uproarious singing drifted faintly over the dunes.

The trail gradually rose away from the beach as it meandered through the dunes. A short distance back from the beach, a wide flat area lay like a shallow bowl, surrounded by the rocky hills that rose away from the beach. The expanse of smooth, hard-packed sand was unbroken except for a few sturdy, well-made log buildings and several large trees, one of which had a large wooden barrel suspended from one of its limbs.

Perhaps two-dozen Otters were working and rushing here and there. Shouts and laughter mingled with the banging of pots and sizzling of cook fires. Fresh shrimp crackled and popped as they were tossed into boiling oil and the savory odor of baking tarts filled the air. A few Otters gave lively spirit to the workers and added to the festive atmosphere as they went about playing bells, drums, and pipes.

Tired and famished after weeks at sea, the crew of *Daring Dream* found new life in the sights and smells. Great pans of warm water, perfumed with sandrose petals, thyme, lavender, or orange peels, were provided for the sea-beasts to wash and refresh themselves. All around them Otters were bustling and scurrying with baskets, kettles, and pots. Long tables were being placed and covered with large tablecloths made from sail-canvas. Cook fires burned merrily here and there. Every beast cheerfully worked at preparing the coming feast.

Wiggen'n Bob, Master of the Cookery, seemed to be everywhere, giving endless orders to the cooks with a gruff good humor:

"Whip the Honeysong Cream faster or I'll knock you with the ladle! It'll never stand up like a sail on the Ship Cake if you leave it limp and loose like that!

"RARRRAH! There must be more pickled snails than that, unless that rascal Alameg has been into the brine pot again! How am I to feed you all, if I'm surrounded by sneaks picking at my stores?

"One hundred and eighty-four for feast, Miss Pottentam, we'll be needing another dozen sacks of turnips, carrots, and yams for the stew. Send the Pickins Twins on up to the storage cave with the wagon." And so on and so on it went all day for Wiggen'n Bob.

The Knot of Otters was nothing if not hospitable and the newcomers had barely appeared before all work stopped briefly and the Otters gathered around the visitors, talking and asking questions excitedly. The Knot at Narrows End Bay was populated entirely by Otters, with the exception of a single, lone Coyote who was abandoned by a Rummer ship some years before because of his advancing age. Half-hidden under a large, floppy hat—ringed all around with strings of shark teeth and shells—and a heavy blanket worn as a cloak, the Coyote jabbered loudly enough to be heard everywhere. Poking and waving with an old, well-used harpoon, its wooden handle carved all over with curious names, the elderly Coyote looked like many a seasoned sea-beast. Brown and burly, hair wizened and weathered from salt air and sun, the Coyote had obviously sailed on many a voyage. Moving about rapidly, still agile and active, stopping a moment with each visiting sea-beast, he continually asked the same sorts of questions:

"Where are you bound? What you got for tradin'? Got any fine goods you'd trade for a beauty of a shark's tooth or a piece of dragon's tail? Got need of a story-teller aboard your ship?"

Some of the common sea-beasts traded brass buttons or a harmonica or the words to an unknown song to the old Coyote for beautiful, dangerous-looking shark teeth. Others asked him about the dragon tail, showing by their bemused looks that they did not really believe such creatures existed.

“Naw, now, you sun-burned old Coyote, don’t you be swilling your lies at me,” Fishbum growled at the old sea-beast. “Dragons live only in the tongues of cheeky old fibbers, like yourself. You’ve been living in the salt and sun so long, your brain-riggings are rotted. Now get on with bothering the others and leave me to my Brew!”

Taking Fishbum’s response as a bit of an insult, the old Coyote—BorMane by name—demanded harshly, “Do you now! Do you now! Rotten are your own brain-riggings, and you’re nothing but spit-in-the-wind for courtesy either!” Flinging off his floppy hat, BorMane revealed a long, jagged scar that ran all the way from one ear to the other across the back of his head. The scar was so deadly-looking and striking that it took Fishbum’s breath away, and diverted his attention from the curious notches in the Coyote’s ears.

“Now, do you know how I came by that scar—do you?” BorMane scowled. “Well, I’ll tell you...” Sticking his harpoon under Fishbum’s nose, the old sea-beast pointed to one of the carvings on it. “That be the name of the ship I was serving on—the *Crust of Luck*—when we was broken to bits by a dragon! That scar is the carving the creature made on my skull with his teeth—so don’t you be telling me about the fraying of my brain-riggings. I know perfectly well what I’m about!”

Fishbum offered no more reply, simply gaping back at the terrible scar as he moved away from BorMane. Red Whale, however, hearing the exchange, was instantly at the side of the elderly Coyote.

“Dragons, you say, old mate?” Red Whale began. “So far as I’ve heard, the only ships as mention them have been sailing the Voi-Nil. You’ve sailed those perilous seas, you say?”

“Do you know anyone but me as claims to have sailed those seas?” the Coyote replied with a twinkle in his eye. “You think perhaps I carved my own skull or that I bought these bits of dragon tail from a shop?” BorMane fell silent for a moment, fingering the shark’s teeth hanging from his hat. “All I would be wondering if I was you, Cap’t, is how all these shark’s teeth—all of them bigger than you’ve ever seen in your life—got to be hanging on my hat. It might have something to do with this here harpoon of mine. That’s all I’d be wondering if I was you, Cap’t.”

“Crinoo!” Red Whale muttered sharply. “I’ll be the one saying what I ought to be wondering, old salt! What I’ll be wondering is if you would explain yourself to me—tell me what you know of the Voi-Nil—if we have time to talk around my table? You would answer my questions then, I think?”

“You mean, sir, that you would be thinking of having me ship out with you, if I tell you?” BorMane asked. “You’ll have to want me, as well as want my story, if I’m to tell you.”

A gleam of happiness leaped in Captain Gumberpott’s eyes. “Shake

on it!" he cried. "Aye, you old sea-bag. *Daring Dream* has a berth for a story-teller! She's bound into the Voi-Nil in search of the Outer Rings and we've no maps but stories—we'll be needing the best stories we can get. You're aboard, Mr. BorMane!"

Captain Gumberpott, taking a long, loud slurp of his Sea Brew, continued, leaning nearer to his new crew member. "Old salt, *Daring Dream* is not a ship for liars. We'll treasure your stories, even if there's mistakes or things you forget—but, mark my words, a conscious lie that puts my crew in peril, and you'll fight the sharks alone."

"I come aboard as I have always served a ship," BorMane replied evenly. "Never mind about lies. I tell you what I know and have seen...that is all. Take it or leave it. If you have harpooned more than a thousand sharks and lived to sell their teeth to fools as buy such rubbish—then, one wonders if a beast such as myself might know a thing or two without needing the kind advice of yourself. If you might like to hear where I run my harpoon through those monster-big sharks or cut the tail off a dragon, then I'd be pleased to sail with you. Take my word for it, however—I can judge my truth-telling without help from you."

Red Whale chuckled and slapped the old Coyote on the back affectionately. "Beginning with sunset tomorrow, you'll be expected at my table aboard *Daring Dream* each night for the ship's council as makes the plans for the voyage. It's my trust to you—and my hope for good success for both of us."

Such a development left BorMane uncharacteristically quiet as he savored his joy in finding a ship that would once more take him to sea. His happy reflections, however, were quickly disrupted as two young Otters, Foggtutt and Rowl, bowled past him, dropping the buckets they were carrying; scattering potatoes around Bormane's feet. Howling with delight, the rowdy little Otters tackled Fishbum—who was still standing nearby—around the knees, knocking him to the ground.

"Sail me! Sail me! Come on, sail me!" the young beasts yelled as they climbed on Fishbum's back urging him to give them a ride. Fishbum gamely tossed the two stubby Otters on his back and began to run wildly, swaying and weaving as if he were a ship being tossed by a storm.

"And the hurricane roared for twenty days!" Fishbum screeched. "The good ship *Otter Death* was battered by FIFTY FOOT WAVES—and every sea-beast aboard was sure it was the end!" Up and down Fishbum bobbed, going around and around in wild circles. "And every beast was sick and feeling green around the gills," he screeched, sounding like some horrific monster of the deep. "The sails were in shreds, the masts cracked and falling to pieces—and soon only the two

brave Otter Mates were left—and THEY WENT DOWN WITH THE SHIP!" Fishbum finished, as he collapsed on the ground panting for breath.

Foggtutt and Rowl squealed with glee and tumbled off as Fishbum fell. But hardly an instant had passed and they were up again, pulling on Fishbum to play some more. But he was not in a mood to play the "good ship Fishbum" again, although he did have in mind further amusement for the young Otters.

"Hey-ho, Captain! Seeking your permission to take these wee bits of rascal and throw them to the sharks!" he yelled.

"Permission granted," Red Whale answered, laughing heartily.

Grabbing the young Otters, Fishbum called on Katteo Jor'Dane to go off to bring one of the large sail-canvas tablecloths. As she ran off to get the canvas cloth, Fishbum, holding Foggtutt and Rowl securely, presented them to Captain Gumberpott with mock solemnity.

"Let it be known to all the Powers of the Sea and all Good Sea-Beasts that sail the Far Points of the Compass, that these here Bits o' Rascal have been tried and found guilty of worrying and annoying Master Fishbum, Sea-King of This Sand Where I Stand! Be it so ordered, therefore, that these wee Otters be thrown to the sharks!"

Returning with the large canvas tablecloth, Fishbum, Katteo, and several other members of the *Daring Dream* crew, placed first, Foggtutt, then Rowl, on the blanket and tossed them high in the air. With peals of laughter from the rough-mannered, but playful sea-beasts, and squeals of delighted terror from the Otters, Foggtutt and Rowl took turns going up and down in the air until they had worn out a goodly number of the *Daring Dream* crew. At last, all were weary of the game and even Foggtutt and Rowl were content to go on with the jobs they had been doing to help prepare for the feast.

Smiling at the sea-beasts who had shown such playful kindness to the little Otters, Winja said, "Come on, you salty slobber-cheekers, you've earned the first bops of the fresh batch of Flummo O'Marrell's Sea Brew. It was made especially for today's celebration and such good-hearted visitors deserve the honor of swilling the first bop."

Seeing the uncertain looks cast in his direction in response to his invitation, Winja winked at Red Whale. Walking over to where the barrel was hanging from a tree branch and a similar barrel sat on the ground beside the tree, he continued, "Swill a bit of Flummo's Sea Brew and you'll think only one of two things. He's either a demon or a magician—depending on how your stomach takes it. In more than thirty summers here at Narrows End Bay, I've seen beasts take it both ways—some say it's like licking muddy water off the bottom of a boot and others swear it's the Kick o' Life. Speaking for myself, I lean toward the latter opinion."

The old Otter reached into the barrel on the ground and pulled out a deeply-rounded clam shell. He held the cup to the tap, gave it a turn, and waited. After several moments, a thick ribbon of slippery black liquid dripped out of the tap and flowed into the bop Winja held, stretching out in a long slithery strand as it slowly filled the clamshell cup. Dark as molasses, glistening strands of Sea Brew ran in a slow stream from a large cask hanging from a timber in front of a small thatched hut.

When the dark liquid had filled the bop, Winja lifted it to his nose and sniffed it as if in ecstasy. Then he tilted the clamshell cup, sucking the Sea Brew out of the bop with prolonged, loud slurps. “Ah...Sea Brew...sweet ’n peppery, hot ’n minty, with just a hint of slap-you-in-the-face...it’s the Kick o’ Life...”

Almost as if on cue, another Otter, stout as the barrel of Sea Brew itself, waddled out of the nearby building. His plump, friendly face, rounded to a circle by bulging cheeks, was framed by bushy sideburns. A large, puffy nose pushed out prominently over a well-greased handlebar moustache.

Clapping Winja on the back, the Otter boomed, “Hally, Winja! Do they want the Brew?”

“Every good and brave beast wants some!” Winja yelled back in reply. “Looks to be a goodly troop of sail-ridin’ salts. I speak in particular of this big red-eyed Wolf with the swagger and guff of a captain—a likely fellow we’ve seen before in these parts. The rest look tolerable honest and more bold than bluster. Sure enough they will want the Brew.”

“Flummo O’Marrell at your service,” the Otter said, sweeping his rough apron to the side as he bent his knee before Captain Gumberpott. “Drink up and welcome, my salty breeze-robbers! My eye-watering, sinus-cleansing, gut-wolloping elixir is freshly brewed—clears the head, steadies the heart, and soothes the nerves; it’s the Kick o’ Life!”

Small, twinkling eyes and a laughing smile added to the warm friendliness of the Otter’s greeting. Despite the friendly welcome, however, some of the sea-beasts still looked dubious about the clamshell cups of dark, slimy-looking Sea Brew that Winja was cheerfully filling and passing around.

“Look how they stare, Winja! Like these brave beasts never took a bit of drink. Well then, let’s have another go in the proper do o’ things.” With great fanfare, Flummo let out a curious wheezing cough, as if clearing a great boulder from his throat, and said, “You’re kindly invited to comfort your belly with some Pop-Fritter Shrimp, Twice-baked Bay Pear Soup, and Cove Biscuits, while you sip a delicate cup of Sea Brew. Come and welcome to the Feast n’ Fiddle to celebrate

young Bem Madsoor's return to health."

"You see, Captain," Winja added, "I've seen it go both ways. Why, there's some dainty wallflower beasts, that's never raised a sail, as would rather drink water. That's the ones that call Sea Brew the 'elixir of gut-rot and staggers,'" he laughed. "But for fine sea-beasts such as yourselves—that's braved the Ice Fall Narrows and think nothing of cussing a hurricane to its face—why, for you, Flummo's Brew is made to order."

As Winja said this, three more Otters came out of Flummo's house, carrying baskets of food and singing with happy gusto:

*So ye made the sea and demons flee*
*You dock-fleeing, sea-woozy shalleets?*[5]
*Halloo-halloo! Hallee!*
*You furled up the wind and gave it flight*
*With twenty-nine strokes of a dagger's bite?*
*Halloo-halloo! Hallee!*
*And you heaved the storms in and anchored them down,*
*With a chain of oaths they strangled and drown'd?*
*With a Fe-Hallee-Halloo!*
*Then a favoring Temp and a blessed fair sail*
*Brings ye here—one port closer to hell!*
*Halloo-halloo! Hallee!*
*Well sang, we say! Welcome, be ye!*
*With a Fe-Halloo-Hallee!*

Finishing their song, one of the Otters laid out wooden plates on the tables while another offered bops of Sea Brew to Red Whale's crew. As the crew took their first swigs of Sea Brew, friendly arguments broke out about whether the sweet, knife-sharp taste of the Brew outweighed its intensely strong odor of fish. In the end, however, after two months at sea, the choice between Sea Brew and water was easy for a sea-beast, and soon all were enjoying Flummo's creation.

"Friends, your coming adds happiness to our celebration," Winja called out to the visiting sea-beasts as they scattered to join in making the preparations. "We did not expect to have such fine guests at our Feast n' Fiddle. By the good winds of the Powers of the Sea, however, the bounty of our gardens and the goodly supply of fresh shrimp we have on ice will come to good use. We'll cook as much as we need and you'll help us plant and fish for more while you visit us."

With a loud 'Hallee' the happy beasts tore into the work of readying the delicious spread. Several of the crew took tentative sips of the Sea Brew as they worked. Galley beasts from *Daring Dream*

joined the Otters tending the cooking fires and the preparations proceeded with joking good humor.

As the *Daring Dream* crew fell to work, Red Whale and Winja discussed the repairs needed by the ship and other arrangements for the visit. Slurping Sea Brew with gusto, Red Whale and the Otter chief made plans to salvage materials from the numerous wrecks scattered along the coast.

Talk of the wrecks and *Daring Dream's* own narrow escape, led Red Whale to ask, "Where's the guest of honor, Winja—this Bem Madsoor?"

"Ah, and who knows about that sprite of hell?" Winja chuckled. "She's set off to the Long-Off Pinnacle to watch for ships and chanting her Hoping Songs to the Powers of the Sea. She wants to leave Narrows End Bay as soon as she can. She's been off to the Pinnacle every day and hardly stops chanting even to take a breath or put some timber in her belly. Bem's one to put skip in the heart of even the bravest beast—nay, she makes every brave beast you ever knew look like weak-kneed cowards by comparison. The places she's sailed and the dangers she's battled would leave me sleepless the rest of my life! Those of us in our little settlement fish and plant our vegetables in happy peace and quiet. We greet a few ships stopping by—such as yourself—but mostly we live a quiet life. Bem Madsoor is very different. Don't assume that all of us at Narrows End Bay are alike." Winja paused for a moment. He pointed off toward the jagged hills rising sharply away toward the interior of the island.

"The point of rock you see poking up like a crooked finger is called Long-Off Pinnacle—you can see thirty miles to sea from there. Bem's up there watching for the ship that will take her home. She's set on getting back to Port Newolf—that's in the Outer Rings, some days sailing from here—raising a crew, and hunting down Sabre Tusk d'Newolf. She's sworn to destroy the Rummers."

Raising his eyebrows for emphasis, Winja leaned toward Red Whale and spoke with a tone of mixed admiration and fear. "Oh, she'll be here soon I'll wager. From Long-Off Pinnacle Bem's seen your ship in the harbor for sure and she'll be wasting no time to get back here."

Winja rubbed his chin and closed his eyes briefly, as if considering what to say next. Then he continued, "I warn you, friend, don't fret if Bem seems a bit uncertain of mind, loose with her weapons, or rude in amusements. She may step on your feet and knock you down, as if you aren't even there. You might feel a throwing lance wisk your hat right off your head and stick it to a tree. She might empty her bop of Sea Brew right over your head and laugh as it runs down your face. Be warned. These are Bem's manners and customs. Sailing with Rummers in the trallé trade has taught her that she can brook no one stronger or

more fierce then herself. She will not tolerate a challenge or a bad word against her—or, thankfully, her friends. She knows that her survival in what she plans depends on her complete fearlessness. Be warned. She is more good than bad, and a more generous and big-hearted beast you will never find. In her, 'bad' does not mean evil. I call her 'bad' as all beasts who dare to challenge her will call her 'bad'—a more strong and forceful, determined and dangerous beast does not exist. Be warned. She may be young, friendly enough, and mean you no harm if you accept her ways. But be warned." Ending his strange introduction to what was to come, Winja took a long slurp of Sea Brew and looked toward the Long-Off Pinnacle.

# Bem Madsoor Introduces Herself

As shadows lengthened in the early evening, a long day of fun and feasting was still going strong at Narrows End Bay. Captain "Red Whale" Gumberpott swung slowly back and forth in a hammock, his legs sprawling over the edges. Thanks to the feasting, his substantial stomach took on truly gigantic proportions as the curve of the hammock pushed it up before his eyes. A bop of Sea Brew rested on Red Whale's stomach and with only minor effort, the good captain could tip the bop enough to send a small dribble of the Brew into his mouth. Such small movements and sips were about all he could manage. The feasting had taken its toll.

Relaxed and gut-stuffed to the limit, Red Whale contentedly watched some of the more energetic crew of the *Daring Dream* preparing to compete against some of the Narrows End Bay locals in a Cheat-Break contest. Red Whale remembered the first time he'd seen Cheat-Break played. He'd been a young mate on that first stop at Narrows End Bay so many years ago. "Arr't it a bit o' wonder the way time sails by?" he mused, recalling himself in those days. "I was a hunder'd pounds less in the gut then," he chuckled, "and it's a blessin' I'm too heavy to be any use to our team now...Needs a young beast sharp o' mouth and weak o' brain—more grit than wit—Aye, getting' old and heavy has its merits," he smiled, sipping his Brew.

But Red Whale quickly turned serious as he noticed Katteo Jor'Dane tying a strip of green cloth around her arm. "Nay, Katteo!" he yelled, without moving from his comfortable hammock. "It's bein' a game better for ya to watch than to play. We can't afford ya gittin' all smashed up!" Red Whale knew the dangers of Cheat-Break and he was not willing to have his best crew-beasts risk serious injury. "Arr—the same goes for you Piggerton! Off to the sidelines with ya!" If a few of his bilge-brained crew wanted to take their chances in a dangerous game, he could replace them with locals if need be. But he'd not allow his most skilled and vital crew to play the fool with their limbs.

A feast day at Narrows End Bay always ended with Cheat-Break races. As the name implied, Cheat-Break was a rough local game that left cheaters with all manner of broken bones. Teams of 'Heavers'—twelve to a team—carried longboats above their heads from one end of a marked course to the other.

As the game began, the longboats were empty. But when a longboat crossed a line at one end of the course, the boat was lowered quickly to the ground and one of the Heavers clambered aboard. The remaining Heavers hoisted the boat up again and hurried off toward the other end of the course. After crossing a similar line at that end, the process was repeated. As more and more rounds were completed, and more and more beasts rode in the boats, the heavier the boats became. The team that carried its longboat the longest distance before it could no longer be lifted was the winner.

A red pennant flapped from the prow of one longboat and a green pennant hung from the opposing one. The contest was defined by the curious way the teams were divided. Equal numbers of Red and Green Heavers carried each longboat. All sorts of trickery could be tried to help one's own team, save only causing the boat to fall. A falling longboat—especially one filled with Heaver beasts—could badly injure many an unlucky beast. Hence, Cheat-Break was a fairly apt name for the rough old sport.

In the early going, the teams moved with some speed. Moving in spurts and spiraling bursts, the boats swayed and dipped in erratic curves. Opposing Heavers struggled to advance their own team's boat, or delay the opposing one. The basic goal of Heavers carrying the opposing team's longboat was to make the journey from one end of the course to the other exhausting. The more times a longboat circled aimlessly due to the evenly-matched struggles of opposing Heavers, the more likely that longboat would lose the game. On the other hand, the strategy of Heavers loyal to the longboat they carried was to keep their biggest and strongest teammates as rested as possible in the early going.

The boats weaved down the course amidst a barrage of jabbering and cursing from the Heavers: "YAR! YA BILGE-DRINKIN' SLIME HOG! KEEPIN' YER ELBOW TO OUT'ER ME EYES! ER I'LL BITT'IN IT UP!"

"ARRR! YA WORTHLESS SAND-HEAD—YER BE BITIN' ME AND I'LL POUND YER TEETH INTA YER GUT!"

The yammering of the Heavers mingled with the cheers and taunts of the crowd.

"GLORY ON, RED! GLORY ON! GREEN'S NOTHIN' BUT SAIL—NOT A BIT O' WIND! GLORY ON, YA GREEN BOAT-SNATCHERS!"

"AH, SHUT YER GAP! RED PLAYS LIKE FISH TRYIN' TO WALK. STEP LIVELY, GREEN!"

Puffing and hollering, the Heavers gradually moved the wildly spinning longboats down the course. Each team fought to hold its own in the rugged contest as the boats went up and down, around and around, in the dizzying race.

Red Whale roared with laughter as he watched the comic spectacle. Running his arm across his eyes to wipe away the tears of laughter that had gathered there, he glanced out toward the bay. Turning suddenly ashen, the smile faded from his face. A strange figure was climbing the rigging of the *Daring Dream!* No beast had been left aboard to take care of the ship. Every member of the crew was ashore! The beast in the riggings was unfurling the sails. The ship was being stolen!

"STATIONS! TO STATIONS! STATIONS! STATIONS! TO THE SHIP! THE SHIP IS BEING STOLEN! IT'S A SNEAK ATTACK!" Red Whale roared, flying into action.

One look toward the ship told everyone Captain Gumberpott was right. Instantly, the Heavers set the longboats down where they were. The Cheat-Break contest was forgotten. *Daring Dream* crew-beasts scrambled to launch the longboats. Captain Gumberpott was already pulling on the oars as BorMane, Fishbum, and Katteo Jor'Dane splashed through the shallows and clambered into the boat. The rest of the *Daring Dream* crew ran to the boats, jumping aboard in tangled masses of arms and legs as the longboats rapidly pulled away from the beach. Diving and leaping through waist-deep water the last members of the crew caught the final departing longboat and pulled themselves aboard.

Pulling hard on the oars, the crew-beasts grunted and groaned as the oars dipped in the waves. The iron-armed sea-beasts had never rowed more urgently. With each jangle of the oars in the oarlocks, the heavy longboats seemed to take flight, leaping across the next wave.

But as the longboats drew closer to the *Daring Dream,* a babble of surprised muttering rose from the crew.

"Nay-O, n' what's the attack? I'd see nar't more than a single beast on the *Dream*!"

"Tha'rs nar't but a wee little cockboat tied up there! Don't look to be a warrin' ship!"

"There's narry but a Sea Wolf up there in the riggin'—just a one!"

"Arr! What's ta meanin' of all this? Be it a lone Wolf Rummer?"

Reaching the ship first, Captain Gumberpott clambered up the ladder. Just as he stepped onto the deck, the Sea Wolf who had been unfurling the sails, swung easily down to the deck on a rope. Dressed in the rough style of one a long away from home, the Wolf wore a badly worn, but neatly mended, crimson waistcoat and pants, with plain sea cotton shirt, and lizard-skin boots. A long red feather poked jauntily from the side of the snug cap she wore tightly pulled on her head. A reddish bronze chain hung around the Wolf's thick neck, with an unusual hooked chunk of blood-red glass attached to it. A short sword was in a scabbard on her belt, and a rolled up net hung from a

sling across her back. Streaks of white hair scattered among the Wolf's otherwise long dark red-brown mane marked her as a "well weathered old varmit," as Winja had described Bem Madsoor on another occasion.

For indeed it was none other than Bem Madsoor, herself. Burned by the sun to the color of mahogany, the swarthy Wolf's long, thin face mimicked her rangy height. Standing at least a foot taller than those gathered around, she could look down on everyone except Red Whale. Yet, with the long feather in the close-fitting cap she wore, she made up even those few inches. Landing lightly on the deck, the Wolf reached deftly behind her back. With nearly magical speed and grace she loosened the rolled net she carried and tossed it high in the air. With a bemused smile, Bem watched the net drop neatly over Red Whale, and—fast as lightning—yanked a cord to pull the net tight around the captain. Stepping toward Fishbum, standing dumb-struck beside his captain, the Wolf drew her sword and—THUNK!—struck it into the deck in front of him. Noticing that his sea-coat was not buttoned—and obviously intending to be rude—Bem proceeded to carefully button it from bottom to top.

"Well, now," the Wolf said, looking closely at each of the *Daring Dream* crew in turn. "I am Bemrasoria Madsoor—to which of you mealy-brained, gill-quivers might I address some complaints about the condition of this ship? Shattered bowsprit...Smashed oarports...a dangerous rip in the main sail...the hull crusted in barnacles...Seems downright unfriendly and inhospitable for sea-beasts to lay around on the beach over yonder like a mess of oily-looking spoiled fish and not have this ship ready for sail. There's a wide sea to cross and the Ogress will begin to blow in a few days. This ship isn't fit to sail across a cup of warm spit in a calmin' breeze. Who's the captain here? Why isn't he in irons for not having this ship ready to sail?"

Bem Madsoor's display of bold, insulting defiance toward their captain stunned the *Daring Dream* crew. The normally brave and rowdy crew stood in mute astonishment. Rough manners and harsh characters were well known to them, but the brash, insulting spirit of this Wolf was startling. Such an insulting beast ought to be jumped and tossed into a rowboat. But something about Bem's manner took the edge off of her insults. Something was likeable about her. There was a rough good-humor in her eye and the constant smile on her face seemed genuine.

"Aye, I seem to recall seein' the captain," Red Whale said dryly, still covered with the net, but taking it calmly, startled as much as the rest. "He's a bad one, though—you can be sure of that—he sailed this here ship right through the Narrows, laughing all the way. And he's done worse and made port in ships a sight worse than this one. We

call him ‘Red Whale,’ and you would be well to know he’s like a Jack-o-Lantern because he has a kindly, laughing shell on the outside, but the fires of hell burn on his insides. So, I offer the warning to one so bold.”

Bem smiled and bowed to Captain Gumberpott, then pulled the net away with lightning agility. “Now dear captain,” she said bowing to him, “I see that irons are not needed to restrain you, which I hope is not an indication of how you will serve in the coming campaign against the Rummers. We sail tomorrow at dawn, do we not?”

“Tomorrow!” Red Whale exclaimed. “Not on your life, Wolf! This ship needs repairs and the crew needs rest. We don’t leave here before a week passes.”

“Well,” Bem replied, “it ain’t my place, as a common sea-beast of this ship, to give my opinion on the captain’s plans. But, speaking as a beast that knows the way through the Voi-Nil to the Outer Rings—and that you have maybe two days before the Ogress begins—I wouldn’t think the good captain would want to keep us waiting.”

Red Whale nodded slowly. “I suppose ya ca’in put up ta bowsprit yerself? Fix the oarlocks? If ya can do that, we’ll sail ta’marrer for sure.”

“Dear captain,” Bem replied with a grim smile, “although you’ve been too long asleep in your hammock—wasting precious time—I see you’re now awake and your crew ready to work. Every worthy beast must put heart and back to making the ship ready for sea. We sail tomorrow at high tide, if any of us knows how to sail a ship! Delay beyond that and there’ll be no reason to sail at all.”

“No reason t’ sail at’all?” Red Whale roared. “We t’ben sailin’ two months n’ we’t nen’t stayin’ here, ner goin’ elsewhar’ thin t’a the Outer Rings. We’s’sailin’ but when’ I say’s we sail!”

“The Ogress sweeps the seas clean beyond the First Past,” Bem said. “Every sea-beast with half a brain has long ago made the voyage across those dangerous seas or is safely in port to wait out the Ogress season. You’re free to make your ship into drifting splinters and trash if you want, but not one sane beast will sail with you when the Ogress is running. You sail into the seas beyond the First Past this time of year and no one will hear from you again. The Ogress are storms like you’ve never seen—sucking winds strong enough to haul a ship right up off the waves and then slam it down again, rain so thick a beast can drown without ever falling in the sea—Aye, the monster waves are the best of it! You want to run the Ogress seas a few days late, you can be my guest, captain—but neither I, nor your crew will be going with you! We sail tomorrow, or we don’t sail at all.”

“And now ya be decidin’ to be t’ Capt’n, is that it, hey?” Red Whale bellowed.

“Nay, captain,” the Wolf replied. “You are the captain and given the orders for sure. I’m just a common sea-beast—in your service, as ever and always—but, being the captain, you’ll not be fool enough to sail beyond tomorrow, you mark my words.” Bem paused and pointed to the first evening stars that were beginning to appear in the sky.

“You see that star low in the sky over there,” she said, pointing toward the far western horizon. “You see how that star shimmers so differently from the other stars? That’s because the air is so hot and wet over there that it makes the light dance in a crazy way. That doesn’t happen except in Ogress season. When that early star starts to dance you’ve got a few days until the first Ogress storms begin. We have maybe ten days to get beyond the Ogress seas. With ten good days of favoring wind, we can make more than a thousand miles and that’s enough to get well across of the Ogress seas before the season begins. Either that or we stay here for two months until the Ogress season is over. You’re the captain and any good captain will do the same.” Bem smiled at Red Whale and clapped him on the shoulder. Captain Gumberpott said nothing, realizing that Bem Madsoor was likely correct but also knowing that poorly done repairs could have disastrous results.

“Come on, Captain,” she laughed, “surely you don’t refuse a pleasant voyage before the storm...and prefer to be pounded by waves the size of a mountain?”

“Sure ’n it’s like that, ya flim-flammin’ bag ’o wheeze!” BorMane burst out as he stepped forward to join the conversation. “Don’ cha be wheezin’ about the Ogress. There’s ways ta fly across the seas and non’ be payin’ visits ta the Ogress. Sleepin’ with dragons and pickin’ shark’s teeth bein’ the way—and what ship except *Darin’ Dream* be fitted for that, I’m askin’ ya? Why she’s ta strongest ship I ever sailed and that’s why her belly’s built for haulin’ riches!”

“You say you’ve sailed the *Daring Dream?*” Captain Gumberpott exclaimed.

“Aye, Capt’n,” BorMane replied, “T’was the first voyage of *Darin’ Dream* that the dragon split me head...we’d shipped out for the Rummin’ Lanes. The ship’s owner heard there was riches ta be had tradin’ in trallés and rummer points. Now where’s the Rummin’ Lanes? All we know’d t’was beyond whatever we knew. Aye, we didn’t know zact’ly where we was headed. Bard Chop—t’was the owner of *Darin’ Dream*—just says, ‘Sail into the Voi-Nil, so’west ’o the settin’ sun and find the island called First Past. That’ll be all ya need to fill with treasures...’ and that was all we simple crew-beasts knew.”

“And did ye find treasure?” Red Whale asked with interest.

“Aye, that we did,” the old Coyote replied. “*Darin’* had a belly full of dragons—and dragons are gold in the Rummin’ Lanes. Ya capture

dragons and ya bein' rich. We filled the belly of *Darin' Dream* with dragons—Aye, ya fancy that, mates—Dragons!—'n sailed on to the Second Past, which bein' smack in the Rummin' Lanes. Dragons is gold, 'n we traded 'em to a Rummer Boar—Sabre Tusk d'Newolf..."

Whirling rapidly to the side, BorMane stepped toe-to-toe with Bem Madsoor, who had leaped toward him, her face contorted with rage.

"...'n don't be cussin' and spitin' about him either, or I'll split yer gut!" BorMane said firmly.

"Sabre Tusk is slaver scum!" Bem yelled. "There's not a worse outlaw on the seas! Don't you go defending him, Old Salt! Sabre left me for dead and that's the best thing he ever did. How many Sharkish villages has he burned and plundered? How many Sharkicts has he made into galley slaves? His crimes are beyond counting! And you defend him? Nay! You always dare to speak his name in praise! Let me end that now! Stand with your sword and I'll slice his memory right out of your brain!"

With such speed that he more heard the whistle of Bem's sword slicing past his ear than saw it, a large swatch of BorMane's long grizzled hair dropped to the deck.

"There, you jelly-brained Rummer-lover!" Bem warned. "Let that be notice of what happens to friends of Rummer-scum!"

BorMane slowly bent over and picked up the swatch of hair. With a crooked smile, he laid it across his open paw, and held it out to Bem. "Nice bit o' sword work, mate! Can't claim I've seen better 'n that. Here, lay yer paw on mine—let this slice o' an old sea-beast's hair be an oath-token a'tween us. Ya hear me out in m' story, and I'll not be mentionin' Sabre Tusk a'gin."

Bem shot a long steely gaze straight into BorMane's eyes before replying. "Aye, Old Salt, I accept the oath-token, but on one condition—You will also hear my own story. We will exchange our stories, then speak not again of Sabre Tusk."

"Done, an' sure 'n it's a promise," BorMane answered.

The *Daring Dream* crew, who had been watching these developments tensely, relaxed again. Admiring comments about Bem's speed and skill with a sword and jokes about BorMane's new haircut rippled among the crew. There was obvious relief that a more serious fight had not occurred between two beasts that all now considered friends.

"An' now I'll be sayin' that we was tradin' dragons—just like I was sayin' before—when I tripped o're a coil o' rope and fell flat-dab in front o' a dragon. Slickin' a snap that dragon jus' sliced me head open. Now you knowin' that's certain death—bein' a dragon bite. No beast lives long after a dragon bite—jus' meltin' away in a pile of purple, crusty skin and fits o' coughin'.

But I bein' standin' here with ya—now how can that bein' right? I askin' ya? How can that bein' right?"

BorMane paused, looking around the crew, before smiling again at Bem. "Well, it bein' right because Sabre Tusk saved me hide, that's how it bein' right! He—and it weren't none but 'im very self—rubbin' the wound with a pack o' mud n' dag fungus the Sharkicts use on jellyfish stings. 'N I'm here today because Sabre Tusk put that mudpack on t'wound n' made me drink some in water every day. How close I came t'throwin' m'soul Over t'Waves. But Sabre Tusk saved me! That bein' the right o'it—say what else y'may about 'im. Yah, I served 'im for many a year. Am I bein' proud o' his burnin' and plunderin'? Nay—I not bein' proud o'it—but I'll ever bein' grateful to 'im for not throwin' m'soul Over t'Waves. N' why did I bein' such a sorry beast, take 'is fancy enough to bein' worth savin'? Why I could un'erstand all the Sharkish folk—all the scattered, isolated bits o'speakin' I could un'erstand, n' Sabre Tusk had not a bit o'kindness in 'im, but he weren't an fog-top either. 'N when he sees that I un'erstand the Sharkicts—yet I never bein' there a'fore—why he's thinkin' I'm some kind'er a magical seein' beast or other, n' plops me in 'is crew."

"You'd never been there before, yet knew the language?" Bem said with surprise.

"Yah, n' that bein' the sure thing o'it, mate!" BorMane laughed. "See what good there bein' in listenin' a bit, rather than jumpin' all t'pot and swingin' yer blade every wish-what? Ticht…ticht…ticht…Me sayin' I'd never been there before don't mean I weren't there before! M'Pappy bein' a Whale-Sailor all o' the seas. One day we bein' anchored in a bay some'wit at sea, just restin' our whales and lettin' em fish as they'd like, 'n we was picked off by some Wrackshee raiders —so, ya seein' it was mor'in like I bein' a wee beast and takin' by some Wrackshees n' sold for slave. How'in I got from there to bein' on board the *Darin' Dream* is mor'in the story I've got to tell now—but that bein' the main o'it."

"So you must have sailed across the Voi-Nil and back again!" Fishbum exclaimed.

"Yah, 'n a fair bit mor'n that for sure," BorMane chuckled. Why, I bein' up 'n down 'n back across every sea that's ever bein' sailed! That bein' why I know's another way to beat the Ogress."

"And how may't that be?" Red Whale asked.

"Sailin' with the Whales," BorMane replied. "The Whales runnin' their trade straight across the Stills—that bein' the long bit o' the seas where the wind hardly blows. No sailin' ships can go there—least ways, not 'n be comin' back. But, be tradin' with the Whales in a good way, 'n they'll bein' willin' to hook up a ship in their freighter runs across the Stills—forty whales or so runnin' freight don't think nothin'

of the Stills. We can run the Stills w' the freighter whales 'n not givin' a thought to the Ogress. So fix up *Darin*' Cap't Gumberpott, I can't bear t' see 'er ailin'—then we run the Stills with the freighter whales."

Satisfied with astonished looks on the faces of those around him, BorMane smiled and invited Bem to tell her own story. "Yah, now, Bem—comin' on 'n tell us what you knowin' that we don't."

Although Bem had known BorMane during her stay at Narrows End Bay, before this she had not heard his whole story. Now, hearing his account left her thoughtful as she realized that although their stories were different, they were also similar.

Cooled somewhat in her anger, Bem began slowly. "Picture, if you will, a young beast skinning sharks out on the beach right in front of her home. Her parents and friends—Sharkict folk, all of them—are unloading a good harvest of sharks from the boats. Ole Waller and Spug Mismer—the biggest and strongest beasts in the village—are hauling the sharks up on the beach where a lot of us young beasts are skinning them, cutting up the meat, and hanging it up to dry in the sun. Beller Waller is out in her kayak checking the shark pens to make sure all the gates are latched properly. Then she screams —'RUMMERS! RUMMER RAIDERS!'—sighting many Rummer boats coming swiftly into the bay. Rummers don't sail in easy, drop anchor, and come ashore a few at a time. They row their galley ships fast as the wind right up onto the beach and jump out all at once to attack. They kill only those who resist, so most of the Sharkicts stand and watch when a Rummer raid occurs. In a short time, the raiders have taken all the shark meat they want, taken whatever hostages they want to replace dead or escaped galley slaves, and then they depart. If any hostage struggles or others try to prevent their being taken, they are soon clubbed senseless and their homes are burned. I was taken in such a raid by Sabre Tusk and my family's home was burned."

"What do the Rummers do with all the fresh shark meat?" Katteo Jor'Dane asked.

"They trade some of it with the Wrackshees in exchange for new galley slaves," Bem replied. "But most of it they sell in Port Newolf and other such places where the Dragon Bosses buy it to feed to their monitors. Sharkicts used to raise only enough sharks to feed themselves and sell a little dried shark meat to the few sailing ships that came by once in a while. But that changed when the Rummer raids began—the Rummers won't take anything but fresh shark meat. So the Sharkicts started raising more and more sharks. When the Rummer raiders come, they fill their ships with fresh shark meat and —if the local folk are lucky, there's enough left to sustain them after the Rummers leave. If not," she said with the fierce look, "it's a long hungry season."

As these last words were spoken, Bem suddenly pulled her sword and once again sent the blade whistling past BorMane's head. A long swatch of hair again dropped to the deck, this time on the other side of his head.

"There, Old Salt—having tidied up your haircut and reminded all that I will forever hate Sabre Tusk and hope to destroy him—I have nothing more to say." The red Wolf picked up the swatch of BorMane's hair from the deck and, just as BorMane had done earlier, laid it across her open paw as she held it out to the Coyote. "As you have offered, I also offer an oath-token. No more will I trouble you about Sabre Tusk. We are one crew now and *Daring Dream* and our good Captain will need us to be united."

Smiling broadly, BorMane placed his paw over the oath-token offered by Bem. "Yah, mate, it's not bein' an easy voyage any ways it comin'. It'll be all o' us as sails through it all, or none o' us will bein' back."

So saying, BorMane and Bem Madsoor joined the rest of the crew as work began to repair the *Daring Dream.* Fourteen days later, Captain Gumberpott steered the fully repaired ship out of Narrows End Bay, set his bearings for southwest of the setting sun, and sailed off into the Voi-Nil.

Having fresh provisions, clean water to drink, and favoring winds made good spirits abundant on the ship. Heading south to join the Whale freighters, each day, *Daring Dream* plowed deeper and deeper into the Voi-Nil. Each night, the ship's council gathered around Red Whale's table and discussed the coming prospects for the voyage. Except for BorMane and Bem Madsoor, no one in the ship's council had ever before sailed the seas they were now crossing, and each night BorMane and Bem were called upon to tell more of what they knew. Images of an entirely new world emerged from the accounts they gave.

"So, as I take it from what you say...," Red Whale observed one night during a council, "...the Voi-Nil is far from empty. Our charts may be blank but there's beasts and more beasts sailin' and frettin' and blusterin' in every direction."

"Aye, Captain," Bem replied as she stood leaning on the table and gazing over the chart rolled out before the council. "You need to think of the Voi-Nil as being different clans of beasts scattered across the seas—so isolated that they're almost worlds unto themselves. Isolated, but not alone. Apart, but connected by the sea."

# Crossports Slizzer

Five days later, the weather was flawless when Crossports Slizzer, the Whale freighter port, came into view. A feeling of almost childish excitement raced among the crew—the first landfall well beyond the reach of Captain Gumberpott's charts! Crossports Slizzer had a snug harbor holding perhaps twenty ships, some lying at anchor off shore, and others tied up along the wharf. Boldy-painted houses of the better sort faced the harbor—their sharply-pointed, red tile roofs reaching skyward, surrounded by wide verandas with lush gardens. A squalid labyrinth of back lanes, overflowing with jumbled shacks and grimy shops, spilled up the hillsides beyond the harbor. Palm trees waved their feathery fronds gently in the breeze.

A strong stone fortress perched on the rocky prominence that towered over the entrance to the harbor. Vultures circled lazily high overhead, their wide wings catching the brilliant sun and sending dark shadows sliding across the deck, as *Daring Dream* tied up at the wharf.

Eyeing the vultures circling above, BorMane commented, "Corsairs cruising, Capt'n—that fort up there is their base. They knows what's what with every ship in these parts—seein' everything, tellin' what they want, plunderin' the ones they choose."

"And no one tries to stop 'em?" Red Whale asked.

"Oh, sure," BorMane chuckled, "there's plenty as could stop 'em if they wanted—but, ya see, ships come to Crossports Slizzer because they want to. It's a bit of—well, I guess you'd call it—a 'twilight place.' Ya see all those ships in the harbor? Why, everyone of them's either a pirate or pays protection money to pirates—but since this is the only port in hundreds of miles, and the best eatin' in the Seven Seas, why, let's just say good and bad slosh together here—a sort of 'convenient peace,' ya might say."

A sickly-sweet, but sharp and fiery, odor hung in the air. The scene was strangely quiet, with only a few wagons, pulled by teams of enormous tortoises, creaking and rumbling across the cobblestone streets. Here and there, the wagons stopped and a couple of burly Watch-Cougars hopped off and picked up bodies from the street, tossing them on the wagons. The process continued as the wagons worked their way down the street. The strange sight put a damper on the enthusiasm of the crew.

“Not a soul breathin’!” one sea-beast howled. “Why’s t’s the plague! We’ll catch t’death o’ it! Let’s get out’a here!”

“Yi! You’s got that right! Looks like body-pickers gatherin’ the dead —poor souls!” another moaned.

“Now don’t you go makin’ up stories you’ll be fools for later!” BorMane chuckled. “You’re just seein’ a bit of what draws these ships here!”

BorMane, having stopped at Crossports Slizzer several times during his voyages crisscrossing the Voi-Nil, was the only member of *Daring Dream’s* crew who knew the place. “You’ll see now how it is with the Voi-Nil,” he chuckled. “Soon’s we hit the wharf and the gangway goes down, you’ll see wonders!” the old Coyote chuckled. “Why the ships’ are peaceful ’cause their crews have abandoned them ’n gone ashore. And the town’s quiet ’cause now just about everybody’s sleepin’—it’s the daily Snooze.

“The daily Snooze?” Red Whale asked.

“Crossports Slizzer is known for its eatin’,” BorMane answered. “Why there’s shark chop houses, muck n’ crots rooms, Slizzer Eel barbeque joints, seaweed cafés, and lizard roasters by the dozen—but those ain’t places for a decent beast. There’s better places for the money you’ll spend. Check out Flimbard Street, the area around Stand n’Step, or head up the road to Lugmate Hill—the grub’ll cost you dear —a hundred pieces of gold for a spot o’ tea, but any other meal, in any other place, seems the vilest slop imaginable in comparison. Fat paunches make for lean wallets in Slizzer.”

“I don’t want to see any more wonders than I have to,” Red Whale replied. “We’re bound for the Outer Rings and I don’t want to waste more time in port than necessary.”

“It won’t take long to see the wonders, Capt’n,” BorMane said mysteriously. “Why, the place itself is a wonder—a regular crossroads of the world, where before it was just a bit of rock piled high with tortoise dung and overrun with flies and mosquitoes—but once the first Whale freighters discovered the place, and the pirates followed them like flies after honey, things began to happen. Now it’s eatin’ and fightin’, eatin’ and fightin’, nothin’ but eatin’ and fightin’. Slizzer’s a wild and reckless place, full of careless livin’ and terrible bad singin’. Aye, you’ll soon see how it is.”

A loud staccato, almost like the sound of someone beating a drum, interrupted BorMane and Red Whale’s conversation. A red-faced old Seagull was nearly running up the gangway, stumping toward them on a wooden leg. The old seabird appeared to have a rugged history. Long white feathers poked out wildly around the edges of a dark blue tricorn hat, calling attention to a ghastly, purple-white scar running diagonally across the bird’s face. As the old Gull approached, Red

Whale noticed that the old seabird's beak was cut off at an odd angle —an angle exactly matching the run of the scar.

"Crinoo!" Red Whale exclaimed softly, "that old sea-beater's got stories to tell—looks he took a cutlass slash full in the face sometime." The wooden peg, fitted snugly to where the Gull's right leg ended just above the knee, suggested other stories the old Gull could tell.

"You'd be Cap't Gummerpobb of the *Darin' Dram*, I'll wager you a barrel of Blazin' Muck!" the Seagull roared loudly, greeting Red Whale in a deep, gruff voice.

"And who might you be, blowin' in like a typhoon?" Red Whale asked.

"I'm Jick Maloon, mayor of this paradise—but beasts 'round here'bouts call me JM Death," the Seagull replied roughly. "Or, mostly just Death—that seems what folks remember most about me—seein's how I've been killed or marooned and left to die thirteen times and I'm still here, as ya see."

"In that case, seems as how they'd call you, JM Living," Red Whale replied with a chuckle.

"Not considerin' the fate of those as tried to kill me," Death replied. "Those as messed me and failed aren't around to mess me again—I see to my business, you understand."

"Sure," Red Whale replied slowly, "it's all right whatever they call you—anyone's nearly cashed in as many times as you have doesn't need folks arguin' with 'em about their name!"

"Blest if I know what you want here," Death said roughly. "My Corsairs scouted you and this ship don't ride low enough in the water to be loaded with cargo. So what are you and where's your home?"

"We are adventurers," Red Whale replied, "bound into the Voi-Nil on behalf of the great Lord Farseeker, charged to explore and discover new lands. We're from nowhere you know, going somewhere we don't know."

"Cut out the fancy talk—the last fancy talker I met didn't have the sense of a crab," Death snapped. "Look, I ain't holdin' a reception here," he continued, surveying Red Whale, ship, and crew with eager and greedy eyes. The long red scar across his face seemed to swell with blood as his excitement grew.

A mass of grayish-white feathers fell in a disheveled mass across the collar of the Gull's seacoat. The wild feathers vibrated as Death's head shook with excited glee. "Only two kinds of ships tie up here—those as take liberties with other ships and those dull ships o' sea-beasts, such as yourselves, just wantin' to come ashore and feast on Slizzer's delights."

The old seabird drew a long slim knife from its sheath at his belt and ran the sharp point across his own neck, causing a slight flow of

blood to flow. “Now you see, Capt’n,” the Gull continued, “Slizzer is a lawful and orderly town. The law here is simple—we’re organized to the discipline of plunder and booty. Our fundamental rule—which I, as mayor, am sworn to uphold with this knife—is that every ship as stops at Crossports Slizzer contributes to the common purse. No pay, no stay—it’s as simple as that.”

The Gull, with a look full of meaning, again ran the sharp knife gently across his neck, leaving another faint line of blood. “Most of the fine ships you see here are owned by Slizzer’s best citizens—Fancy Grace; Black Fats, the Mad; and Captain Bull. These fine, civic-minded citizens do as they will with the ships they find at sea—and pay ten shares of their booty into the common fund. For those as trade in the dull commerce of normal business, or are just passin’ through Sizzer, it’s two thousand pounds of gold—payable now, if you please.” The Seagull looked at Red Whale expectantly.

“What do you mean, two thousand pounds of gold, payable now?” Red Whale demanded. “I don’t owe you a thing, you old swindler! Now get off of all this nonsense—you’re not dealing with a fool.”

“Weell,” the Seagull replied slyly, “you don’t seem to have shown any extry smarts in landing here, thinkin’ use of the docks was free! You tie up and—weell, then—you pay for the privilege of dockin’ here. If you don’t have gold, I’d take three thousand pounds of pearls instead.”

“But we’re here to do business!” Red Whale exploded. “All we want is to contract with the Whale freighters to carry us across the Stills.”

“That’s fine for you and the whales, but not for the shopkeepers and cafés—nor for the mayor. That’s why I, as mayor, am charged to maintain proper respect for law and order! Now, Cap’t Gummerpobb, I think you’re best advised to pay up—then step right this way and bring your crew with you. You’ll see that Slizzer is an absolute emporium of…”

“Bah! You greedy-grub! Why, I’ll not pay you a chip ‘o sand nor tossin’ anything in your grubby little wing until I’m ready.”

“Oh, my,” Death replied, “if you don’t have enough money, don’t worry—we specialize in loans! You can borrow against your ship and crew if you prefer—our bankers are just over there.” Pointing to a hulking, wildly-painted ship anchored a couple of hundred yards away, Death continued, “It won’t take but a moment to get them here.”

“Your ship’s not much to look at, Cap’t Gummerpobb, but takin’ the crew into the equation—looks like I could sell ’em right easy—why, I think that would be plenty to secure a fine loan for you. You’ll have plenty to give you a good time ashore!”

“my name’s not, Gummerpobb!” Red Whale roared, “The name is

Captain norayn gumberpott—And i'll have none o' your stinking-bilge-sucking loans!"

"Suit yourself, Cap't Gummerpobb," Death replied, "but unfortunately, you've already been docked here nearly an hour and that tab must be paid." Pulling a red cloth from the inside pocket of his seacoat, Death waved it high over his head, toward the strange-looking schooner anchored near the harbor entrance.

A few moments later, loud cursing and hooting laughter erupted on the schooner. Red Whale lifted his glass and, squinting, swept it across the mysterious ship. He could see the decks were crowded with rough beasts, weather-beaten, ugly, and fierce, armed with every manner of weapon imaginable. Although the ship offered no immediate threat, it was clear that the Seagull's "bankers" were an unpleasant lot. The nature of the possible unpleasantness, however, remained a mystery as Red Whale watched the raucous activity on the ship. Amazingly, the schooner seemed to be sinking in the water at the stern!

The look of surprised curiosity on Red Whales face was not lost on Death. "Yash, Cap't Gummerpobb! I see you've never seen a shark-deck ship before!"

With a sneering laugh, Death explained what was happening. "That would be Fancy Grace coming to offer you a loan! You see, Fancy Grace opens a valve and lets some water into tanks in the stern o' her ship. The weight tilts the ship backward and the stern slides lower in the water."

Death paused and gave a hard eye to the *Daring Dream* crew gathered round. "HAR-HAR-HAR!" he laughed, "Then the real fun begins! Put your glass on the stern o' the ship, Captain Norayn Gumberpott, and see what happens now!"

Red Whale peered through his glass with an increasing sense of that things were about to become very unpleasant, indeed. Red Whale's pulse quickened as feelings of fear and astonishment see-sawed within him. Nearly transfixed by what was happening, Red Whale watched a large gate swing open on the schooner's stern, allowing seawater to flood into the ship.

"Don't worry, Captain Norayn Gumberpott," Death said with an evil smile, "Fancy Grace's ship won't sink—water only pours into the shark-deck. Now, I imagine you wonder what a ship needs a shark-deck for—well, just keep watching…"

In a few more moments, hideous sea-beasts, each armed to the teeth, came swarming out through the open gate, riding huge sharks! Red Whale stifled a gasp—judging each shark to weigh at least a thousand pounds, sea-beasts riding astride, holding the tall vertical fins! The powerful sharks carried their riders rapidly across the harbor toward *Daring Dream,* with only their top fin and half-submerged

riders visible.

A female Wolverine led the approaching horde. Red Whale studied her carefully through his glass. Small in stature but not in ferocity, the pirate leader cut slashing circles above her head with a cutlass, kicking her shark for maximum speed. Swearing at the top of her lungs like a Banshee from hell, the rascal's wild orange eyes flashed like fire. Large earrings dangled beneath a broad jet-black hat. Dressed in bright, gaudy clothes made of the finest cloth, the little pirate leader had wealth, but not good style, Red Whale decided. Several front teeth were prominently missing, but numerous diamonds sewn into her seacoat flashed in the sun, off-setting that defect. A long, lavishly woven scarf fluttered around her neck. The overall effect was elegant mayhem. Guessing that over a hundred pirates were closing in on *Daring Dream,* Red Whale did not need convincing that they could easily take his ship as "payment" for any supposed debts he might have.

Death, smiling broadly, said, "I have the honor of introducing you to the meanest, and most colorful, of my business associates—Fancy Grace. Now, shall I invite them to come on aboard and take control of your ship, or would you prefer to pay the two thousand pounds of gold, and go ashore and have some fun?"

"I don't owe you a cup of spit, you dung-brained robber!" Red Whale replied. "The only gold we have we need to pay passage with the Whale freighters, but if you will call off your business associates, I will give it to you." Looking Death straight in the eye, Red Whale added, "Then if you'll just let us cast off, we'll go our way in a few minutes and be out of your way forever."

"Well spoken, Cap't Gummerpobb! Hear! Hear! I sense we have reached a deal. Your crew will praise you for your wisdom…but, now that you're paying up, why not let the crew go ashore and enjoy Slizzer? They won't want to miss the fun!" Stamping his peg loudly on the deck, the old seabird shouted, "Muck n' Crots! Muck n' Crots! Muck n' Crots for the crew!" The noisy Seagull bounded from one end of the deck to the other, long ragged feathers flying and sharp keen eyes darting quickly. Stamping his peg, he called out, "No'se Spill Muck and Steamed Crots for the crew! Come on ashore and drank 'er up, and chuck 'er down, mates. Welcome to Crossports Slizzer! Hurry ashore—it's the greatest emporium of eatin' and fightin' in the world! Just hand over the gold and everyone goes ashore for all the Muck 'n Crots or Screamin' Slammers they can eat!

Astonished at how the conversation had changed, Red Whale blustered and hollered, "My crew is not goin' ashore to be worked over with more of your pick-pocket finance! Take the gold and go pay someone to drop a boulder on your head! Now, get off my ship!"

JM Death, however, simply ignored Red Whale as if the Captain's wrath were a bit of breeze. The Seagull pulled a watch from his pocket, peered at it, and furrowed his brow. "Captain," he said, "you've now been tied up at the dock going on eighty-five minutes—with that additional time, and still none of your crew ashore taking advantage of Slizzer's delights, and having declined Fancy Grace's offer of a line of credit, I'm afraid that you owe me another thousand pounds of gold."

Looking at his watch again, then motioning toward the pirates cruising on their sharks just a stone's throw away, Death said, "There, Captain—you see that Fancy Grace awaits your decision. Is it going to be Muck and Crots for the crew, or Fancy Grace taking your ship and selling you all for slaves? With you tied up for almost ninety minutes and still not producing business for Slizzer, I fear that Fancy Grace requires an answer. You'll notice the diamonds dazzling on Fancy Grace's coat, as numerous as the stars in the sky," Death continued. "Each one represents a ship taken for plunder—she just loves to keep track."

Gazing at the whooping, ferocious marauders circling in the harbor, Red Whale could hear Fancy Grace howling above the din like a hungry wolf. Having no arms with which to give resistance, he faced the reality of surrendering his ship and crew. He face grew deathly grim and his frame trembled. It was not the terror of a coward, however, that moved him. It was the energy of a tireless captain considering and discarding plan after plan to save his ship.

Red Whale was about to concede defeat when BorMane suddenly stepped forward.

"So what's a piece of t' Maggon Dragon worth t' ya?" he asked.

"The Maggon Dragon?" Death said, his eyes blazing with excitement.

"Aye, you heard me right," BorMane replied.

"But the only one's that's seen the Maggon Dragon is those as died in its jaws and myself!" Death exclaimed.

"An add t' that m'self!" BorMane said with a smile. "And proof of it's right 'ere." Pulling out the piece of dragon's tail he wore on a chord around his neck, BorMane dangled it as he continued. "Now's long 'bout's three years past, I was sailin' with Sabre Tusk d'Newolf—and we's land'd on Maggon's Island, not especially knowin' where we were. Why, we's takin' on water n' pickin' fruit n' then the Dragon comes on us fierce! Slashed up a few of our crew, till by the Anc't Ones—I drove a harpoon up his gut—purest blessin' or luck, call it as ya may."

Red Whale gave BorMane a questioning glance.

BorMane ignored him and, walking up to Death, dangled the piece

of dragon tail before him. “So, who’s tail do ya think this might’s be?”

“The Maggon Dragon,” Death replied slowly, his eyes wide as saucers.

“Thought ya might’a heard of the Maggon Dragon,” BorMane chuckled, “why that’s what happened ta your leg, ain’t it?”

“The first ship I sailed years ago…” Death began, staring at the piece of dried dragon tail, “…there was a mutiny, and the captain and those of us loyal to him were marooned on Maggon Island. The Dragon got everyone but me and the captain—well, except for my leg. The Dragon got that, curse him! The captain saved my life. We lived in a cave for nearly six months, keeping a fire going all the time to keep the Dragon away. We’d never go anywhere without torches—fire was the only thing the Dragon feared. We built a raft—always keeping a ring of fire burning around our worksite. Sometimes, the Dragon would just come right down and lay on the beach, watching us. Believe me, we never let that fire die down!”

Reaching out and touching the piece of dragon tail, Death continued. “When the raft was finished, we sailed away. We were picked up by a pirate ship and joined the crew—and that was my first escape from death, in this case the literal jaws of death.”

“So’s it may give ya some revenge ta wear a piece of that ol’ monster, eh?” BorMane said.

“Yash! I’d give anything to wear proof that the Maggon Dragon got its just desserts.”

“You let Cap’t Gumberpott and me go ta the Whale freighter station, and I’ll give you this piece of the Maggon Dragon’s tail,” BorMane said.

“Why, sir, I’d rather have a piece of that wicked beast,” the old seabird laughed, “than have clothes to wear for the rest of my life!”

Turning to Red Whale, the Seagull slapped him on the back. “Here you go, Cap’t Gummerpobb—I take your gold, and give half to Fancy Grace to buy nice. I let you and the Coyote go ashore to bargain with the Whale freighters—and, if you successfully make a deal with them, I give you half the gold back to pay them, but I keep the piece of Dragon tail.”

Red Whale felt encouraged, but also suspicious and troubled by Death’s offer. It seemed to provide a way to get *Daring Dream* out of the clutches of Death and Fancy Grace. But, if he promised half his gold to Death, and Death honored the bargain, would that leave enough gold to make a deal with the Whales for passage across the Stills? Red Whale looked hard at Death, studying his face for any sign that might suggest his true intentions. He had little reason to trust Death and his “business associates,” but on the other hand, what other option did he have to save *Daring Dream* and his crew?

"Is that all?" Red Whale asked.

"That's all," Death replied, smiling. "Load the gold onto the dock and give me the Dragon tail—then, you're on your way to the Whales."

"No," Red Whale responded firmly. "I give you my word as an honorable beast that I will fulfill my part of the bargain, but the gold stays on the ship."

Death again took the red cloth he had used to summon Fancy Grace from his pocket. Holding the cloth as if he were about to wave it again, he looked at Red Whale questioningly. "Would you prefer to deal with Fancy Grace on this matter?" Death inquired with a smug smile.

Red Whale hesitated a moment, casting a gaze around the deck at each of his crew. Then he gave the order: "Fishbum, have our ship's gold loaded off on the dock." Following suit, BorMane slipped off the cord holding the piece of Dragon tail and gave it to Death.

It took the better part of the day for the four-hundred bags of gold coins to be unloaded from the ship. Specially built to inhibit easy theft, the compartment holding the gold was constructed in the deepest reaches of the ship. The passage leading to the compartment was extremely narrow, more than twenty-feet long, and passable only by a single beast squeezing sideways through the opening.

All day long, Death complained about the slowness of unloading the gold. "What's this," he fumed, "if this doesn't speed up, I may change my mind about the bargain we made."

"Calm down, mate," Red Whale replied, "we've only got one sea-beast small enough to squeeze through the passageway—and even if we had another, only one can go in the passage at a time anyway. And because they have to squeeze sideways, they can only carry two bags at a time anyway."

"Whoever designed that storage plan was insane," Death sighed, "ten hours and we're still not done."

"Or a genius," Red Whale chuckled. "Sure made it hard for you to rob us."

# Between Drowning and Drowned

The sun was just sliding below the horizon when the last bags of gold were removed from *Daring Dream.*

Looking at Red Whale with disgust, Death snarled, “Now that you’ve enjoyed your little joke, get out of here—before I change my mind.”

“Will the Whale freighter station still be open this time of day?” Red Whale asked.

“Get out of here, you idiot!” Death yelled. “Anytime you go, you’ll be able to find out what you need to know about the Whale freighters. Now get going before I call Fancy Grace back!”

“Fishbum, you’re in charge until we get back,” Red Whale said as he and BorMane left the ship and went off to find the Whale freighter station.

“Aye, aye, Capt’n!” he replied. “Good luck.”

Walking down the gangway onto the pier and heading up the street running along the harbor, Red Whale looked sideways at BorMane.

“When you told us the story about that piece of dragon tail before, you never said anything about a Maggon Dragon,” Red Whale observed. “Something tells me that not all the stories you tell are true—I thought you promised something when I took you on as crew?”

BorMane turned and grinned at Red Whale. “The only promise I made was not to tell any stories that would put your crew in danger,” he replied. “I think the story I told Death about the Maggon Dragon had the opposite result.”

“Aye,” Red Whale chuckled, “I was just lettin’ you know I noticed.”

Walking down the street running along the harborfront, the sea-beasts were surrounded by the sights and sounds of Crossports Slizzer. The town was gradually coming back to life following the daily Snooze. Eating establishments crowded every street and disorderly sea-beasts of every rank and condition swarmed the dives and vendors nearest the harborfront.

Red Whale, although he had sailed many seas and visited endless exotic ports, felt that he was thousands of miles from anything familiar. It was not that the houses looked strange—they did not. It was not that the beasts were curious in dress—they were no more odd-looking than other beasts he had encountered in his travels. No, it

was the smell of the place that turned his senses upside down.

There was a muscular, thick-coated Badger roasting nuts in a spicy-smelling oil; a dark, broad-faced Fox, with pigtails reaching to his ankles, juggling burning incense balls; some swarthy Sheep, with dirty matted hair, selling pungent salamander kabobs; a big, round-eyed Goat, wearing a lizard-tail hat bristling with colorful fishhooks, smoking fish on racks in the street.

Everywhere they looked, Red Whale and BorMane saw braziers smoking, cook pots steaming, and fish, seaweed, clams, and every other type of seafood being unloaded at eating houses that stretched in every direction down the streets of Slizzer. On every corner, there were vendors with carts selling their stock in trade. Not only boiled lobster and baked fish, but also Most prepared their goods on small braziers, lighted with charcoal. There was even a strolling vendor, with a tiny brazier hooked over one arm, roasting corn and potato cakes. All of them sang their wares:

*"Six o'clock and time to eat!  Snapped n' pickled lizard's feet!"*

*"Frumming with toast! Frumming with toast!*

*Slapped and slathered Frumming with toast!"*

*"Pearl a pound! Pearl a pound! Pissts on sticks, Pearl a pound!"*

Along the more crowded streets, some of the larger cafés had troupes of musicians and performers calling customers to come in and eat. At one such establishment, where a surging crowd of rough sea-beasts was elbowing to get in, a vile-looking, hulking Boar was pounding on a drum and singing out:

*"Here's Muck, and fine Crots, from Yobmahoy Bay,*
*They're never more Slammed than they are today!*
*They never are roasted, and never are fried,*
*And never, never, ever artificially dyed.*
*Stuff them in now, and Snooze it off later,*
*Our Muck & Crots with cold jugs of d'Flater!*
*Check your knives at the door, put your cutlass at rest,*
*Suck up our Muck, and toss down our fine Crots—*
*There's no other way, but to say they're the best!*

Beyond the prodigious eats, there was also a monstrous fights going on. Beasts going down the streets simply stepped aside as beasts flew through the air, fighting and wrestling. The fighting seemed so normal a part of life in Slizzer that—despite the struggling masses of beasts,

punching and swearing at each other, and the flying bricks, rocks, and furniture—it went almost unnoticed.

CRASH! Two sea-beasts whirled past Red Whale, grappling at each other's throats, smashing into a sidewalk café table, where several other sea-beasts were eating. In an instant those offended beasts joined the fracas—now ten beasts were cursing, biting, kicking, and howling for blood. BorMane jumped out of the way as a huge Boar dived past and tackled another sea-beast, who struggled free and pounded on the Boar with a chair. In an instant, a first-class brawl was spreading down the street. Except for the beasts involved, no one seemed to care. Everyone else went on with their business, seeming unconscious of the angry swearing, ferocious fighting, and flying blood and fur.

"So you see the wonders of Crossports Slizzer," BorMane laughed as he and Red Whale worked their way through the fights and crowds. Red Whale agreed that the sights, sounds, and smells of Slizzer were, indeed, hard to resist. At one corner there was even a jovial sea-beast brandishing a cutlass, herding customers into a lizard roasting dive. Had Red Whale not had an urgent need to find the Whale freighter station, he might well have stepped into one of the joints and had a plate. But instead he pulled on BorMane's arm every time he seemed to be wandering toward one of the cafés.

"Eye's to the front, BorMane!" Red Whale said as he once again guided his wandering mate away from particularly enticing odors wafting from a Shark Chop House. "Our mates need our help—no time to stop and eat now."

BorMane sighed and rejoined Red Whale. BorMane led Red Whale toward the cargo-handling area of the docks and, after walking several more blocks, he pointed to a street sign that said, Freighter Way. Turning down the narrow alley lined with warehouses, they picked their way through throngs of greasy, unshaven, muscular Roustabout Hares moving cargo to and from ships. Everywhere, barrels, crates, boxes, casks, and bundles of lizard skins and shark hides were going up and down, or moving from here to there.

It was not a jolly place. "Heave! Heave! Stain your backs! Heave!" Straining and struggling with heavy ropes and cargo, the Roustabouts cursed and swore at anything that came near them. They even pushed and shoved Red Whale and BorMane out of the way if they happened to stumble against them in the crowded, tight spaces of the alley.

Deciding that they should ask for directions to the Whale freighter station, they waited to speak to a towering Barge Goat who appeared to be of some importance. At least he was bellowing at a group of burly Roustabout Hares struggling with an overturned cart of fish. "Blast yar't laz'n stumps! Fly! Fly! Lift yar't stumps!" the Barge Goat

roared.

The weary Hares, despite the evening chill, were shirtless in the heavy damp; even their coarse leggings sweat-soaked from the heavy lifting. Panting, their breath heaving from exertion, they weren't in a mood to be hurried. "Shush yar't gob, M'ster Billows! Narn a single one o' us that eats at yar't table. We'll be loadin' yar't wagon right along. Just be shush'in yar't gob!"

The rough-looking roustabouts, some with colored bandanas tied across their heads, others with snug cotton caps, one with a bowie knife stuck in his belt, another with a large piece of his ear missing, gave the Barge Goat surly looks as they returned to their work. Showing their contempt, the Hares thumped on barrels as they rolled them, giving beat to a swamp shanty wailed in the most tortured Barge Goat brogue:

*'N Mis'tr B kissed his'elf in the mirror,*
*'n 'is crew b'gan to cheer.*
*Oh, oh, up he puckers, hav'in no fear.*
*'N he kissed his'self on the nose,*
*'n thanks from the ladies arose,*
*Oh, oh, no more, no more shall they fear.*
*No more, no more, no more shall they fear.*
*Mis'tr B has found 'is lovin' own dear.*
*Oh, oh, he's found 'is lovin' own dear.*

The Hares howled with glee. "We'll be done in a lickety-cut, yar't own lovin' beauty! Har, har, har!" they laughed. Grumbling darkly, Mister Billows struck a match and puffed angrily on his long clay pipe, glaring at the Hares. "Blasted rob'nabb'it cargo weevils!" he fumed, muttering amidst the Hares' raucous laughter.

As the Barge Goat turned away from the Hares to return to other business, Red Whale stepped forward. "Excusing myself, sir, but where'd I find the Whale freighting station?"

"Gone, gone this week last—at least if'n you want shippin'!" the Barge Goat replied.

"Gone!" Red Whale exclaimed.

"Aye! And what 'bout that's you don't und'stand?" the Barge Goat said.

"But I'm desperate for their help," Red Whale cried. "How can they be gone?"

"They run's a four-month freightin' route," the Barge Goat responded. "Two month's out stoppin' at ports, then two month's back stoppin' at different ones."

"Four months!" Red Whale moaned. "We can't wait four months!"

"Which way's you shippin'?"

"We're bound for the Outer Rings and wanted to avoid the Ogress. So, we were lookin' to the Whales to carry us across the Stills."

"Four months," the Barge Goat repeated. "No chance a'fore that. Only shippin' runs are in directions where there's breeze'in for sailin' ships."

Red Whale was furious. Surely Death had known the Whale freighters had departed! He had allowed Red Whale and BorMane to go on what he knew would be a disappointing trip. "Crinoo! Zarr!" Red Whale scowled as he and BorMane retraced their steps. "Oh, and he's a clever one!"

Returning to *Daring Dream* at a rapid pace, Red Whale found Death lounging contentedly on the sacks of gold coins piled on the dock. A goodly number of Fancy Grace's crew surrounded him, quietly peeling and eating shrimp. The ferocious pirates seemed to take no notice of Red Whale and BorMane. Being stripped naked to the waist, however, showcased the gruesome scars criss-crossing their bodies, sending a message impossible to ignore. Hatchets, knives, and cutlasses hung from wide belts at their waist. The purpose of the display of force was obvious to Red Whale.

"So, it appears our deal is off," Red Whale commented.

"Heavens, no," Death replied with a gruff laugh. "The bargain's sure and true's it ever was."

"Then command those rascals to leave and allow me to reload my half of the gold. We will gladly depart as soon as it's loaded."

"Then you are the one breaking our bargain," Death replied.

"Me?" Red Whale roared. "Me break the bargain? Nay! I have honored my part of the deal."

"Then all the gold, and the piece of Maggon Dragon's tail, are mine," Death said with a smile. "The bargain was that I would return half the gold to you if you were successful in making a deal with the Whale freighters—but, you were not successful."

"Crinoo! You bilge-bathing, vomitous scoundrel!" Red Whale exploded. "You may be clever, but your trickery only proves that all the blood in your head is fly-swarming dung!"

"I think what it proves is that I win, you lose," Death replied. "Now be happy that I show you mercy and let you keep your ship and crew. That's a gift from your friends. We do hope you'll call at our friendly harbor again someday."

Red Whale and BorMane exchanged glances. No words were needed. In countless Ship's Councils during *Daring Dream's* voyage, their goal had been reaffirmed time and again. They would find the Outer Rings and return to Lord Farseeker with a full report in the shortest possible time. It was out of the question to wait four months

at Slizzer—even if they wanted to!

"Mr. Fishbum," Red Whale called to his mate waiting at the top of the gangway, "make *Daring Dream* ready to depart. We leave with the ebb tide."

"Aye, Capt'n, she'll be ready." Fishbum responded.

"Look lively, mates!" Fishbum called out. "See to the rigging and stores!"

In high spirits, the crew gave three cheers to Captain Gumberpott and *Daring Dream,* and fell to their tasks.

"Where'r you bound?" Death inquired, just as Red Whale turned to board the ship.

"Back the way we came to catch what's left of the Fair Temps," Red Whale replied.

"The Fair Temps will be all blowed out for the season," Death said. "You'll be sailin' straight into the path of the Ogress—and speaking as your special, personal friend, only a fool would sail those waters during Ogress season."

"I prefer the danger I know, to the dangers I don't," Red Whale answered. "I've weathered many a storm, and prefer the company of a hurricane to friends such as you."

Returning to the ship, Red Whale directed the preparations to depart. Some hours later, *Daring Dream* rode the falling tide out of the Crossports Slizzer harbor and set its prow northward to catch the Fair Temps. Riding a fresh breeze across easy seas, the spirits of the crew were high. Fifteen days after leaving Slizzer, the weather began to thicken and the skies turned gray and gloomy. Scudding along at full-sail, Red Whale searched the sky with his practiced weather-eye, suspecting that *Daring Dream* was heading into a heavy storm.

By the following day it was raining steadily and the seas became ugly. During the night, the rising screech of a gale-force wind combined with the pounding waves to drown out every other sound. The endless torrential rain, mixing with the flying spray from waves breaking across the ship, gave the effect of having no sky whatever above—as if *Daring Dream* had entered some twilight zone between drowning and drowned.

At the first sign of dangerous weather, Red Whale had ordered every stitch of sail to be taken in, furled and tightly lashed. It made no difference. The crew below decks, waist deep in water, working the pumps, heard nothing of the howling wind shredding the sails like tissue paper and carrying the masts away as if they were twigs.

*Daring Dream*, as sturdy a ship as was ever built, labored valiantly against the tremendous waves, taking on considerable water, but refusing to admit defeat. For two days and nights the crew bravely and feverishly worked the pumps. Lashed to the pumps to keep them

from being tossed away from their posts by the pitching deck, the struggling crew managed to keep the water from rising beyond the bottom deck.

As the storm at last began to diminish, vivid flashes of lightning from the departing rain clouds revealed the fearful reality of the nearly-shattered ship. The heroic efforts of the weary crew had saved her, however, and with only 3 feet, 8 inches of water left in the hold, Red Whale ordered the pumping stopped and all hands to their bunks for an urgently needed rest.

Unable to sleep himself, Red Whale climbed over the wreckage to reach the main deck. Unseen in the darkness, he stepped into a gaping hole that had been opened in the deck. Stumbling forward, his arm slammed into the jagged remains of the mainmast. Stabbing pain momentarily took away his breath. Struggling to his feet and holding his injured arm tightly, Red Whale's pain-narrowed eyes widened with the happy sight of Fishbum coming toward him.

"Looks desperate, Capt'n, and you look to be the worst of it yourself, sir," Fishbum said as he reached Red Whale. "Come on with me, sir, you need some rest—let's take a look at that arm n' get some sleep."

"My Mam always told me to work my head more than my seat," Red Whale replied. "I can't rest. We are in more danger now than during the storm—our water supply is ruined for sure and our food may be lost as well. We can't sail or even use the oars because the stores and crates shifted in the storm and the oar-ports are blocked. No, the crew needs a few hours rest, but I must think how to save the ship."

# So There Are Beasts In This Waste!

Red Whale's considerable bulk, hitting the sea during his escape from the *Daring Dream,* created a loud *SPLOOSH* that had not gone unnoticed. Roolo Tigg was a light sleeper in normal times, but the dramatic storm of recent days had left his mind racing, making it nearly impossible to sleep despite his physical exhaustion.

*SPLOOSH!* "What was that?" Roolo thought to himself, instantly alert. Leaping from his hammock, he made his way quickly among the tightly-packed hammocks of the sleeping crew. Gaining the deck, and looking over every side of the ship, he found no apparent case of "sea-beast overboard." He was just turning away from the side to return to his hammock, when he noticed that the night watch was not at its duty—Red Whale and Fishbum were gone!

The realization that the Captain and his mate had apparently abandoned their watch made Roolo instantly suspicious. "They must have gone overboard for some reason," Roolo realized. But what could have caused the rock-solid, trustworthy Captain to abandon his post? Surely, something was desperately wrong!

"What's up, Mr. Tigg?" Bomper Spits asked. Bomper had wakened when Roolo had collided with his swinging hammock during his movements through the dimly-lit interior of the ship. Hearing Roolo's steps up toward the deck, the curious Bomper followed.

"Somethin's gone to worsts," Roolo replied. "Capt'n and Fishbum are gone—over the side it appears. What's that about?"

"That would be the problem over there," Bomper cried, pointing to the swarm of kayaks rapidly approaching the ship, splitting into streams with the obvious intent of encirclement.

"Capt'n saw it comin," Roolo agreed. "Too many to resist, and they're on us with complete surprise—we're taken without a shot, that's for sure."

"Yah," Bomper agreed, "Capt'n and Fishbum went for help, I'd wager. But what can we do—all our mates is asleep—no time to rouse and defend."

"Follow the Capt'n, as always," Roolo replied tersely, "over the side, and quick about it."

So saying, Roolo and Bomper ducked low to avoid notice and scrambled to the far side of the ship, farthest away from the waves of

attackers. Grabbing a dangling rope line to the keelboat that bobbed on the waves below, the two beasts skittered down the line into the boat and cast off. Urgently rowing with all the strength they had, the two sea-beasts managed to pull away to such a distance from their ship that, in the semi-darkness, they would not draw attention to themselves. The two beasts listened and watched as the attacking Wrackshees encircled, then boarded, *Daring Dream,* observing their prediction come true: the ship and all the crew taken without any apparent violence.

"Slavers for sure," Bomper said. "They noticed some easy pickin's and took a wounded bird."

"Vast! Crinoo! That be for sure," Roolo agreed grimly.

"The Capt'n and Fishbum are two smart beasts," Bomper observed. "They will make it to help, if any beasts can."

"Aye-Yah!" Roolo replied. "They will deal with the slavers—but we have no way to know where they are or how to help them. We need our own plan. What should we do?"

"The *Dream* is wrecked," Bomper said. "The slavers will pick her clean and leave her bones to rot where they are—unless they torch her, which they may not want to do. BorMane says there's not much of law and order in these parts—Wrackshees, Rummer Boars, and other unwashed baddies everywhere. I'd be doubtin' that the ones as took our ship want to draw flamin' attention from their competitors!"

Pausing for a moment, Bomper chuckled, then continued, "I say we go for help of a different kind than the Capt'n's probably after—and what else will he need beyond hands to help him rescue his crew, why a ship to sail! I say we get help to repair the *Daring Dream*—a few days will get her seaworthy again. We could work at night so's to not attract attention—keep the work low and out of sight during the day—then raise the masts and sails in a single night, so's to show our hand only when we're ready!"

"Yah!" Roolo agreed. "You direct repairs while I raise a new crew—then we go after our mates with the *Dream* and carry them off!"

Having agreed to their daring plan, the two sea-beasts wrapped pieces of cloth around the oarlocks to deaden the sound and rowed off into the night. Things began going badly immediately. One of the oarlocks broke off completely, forcing the sea-beasts to paddle the stout boat. The heavy, eight-foot long oars, designed to give maximum power with the leverage provided by oarlocks, were nearly useless as paddles. After struggling for nearly an hour to break the iron-hard wood of the oars, they managed to shorten each oar. The handle of one of the oars completely shattered, however, leaving only the flattened end of the oar and one foot of handle. In such circumstances, paddling was an exhausting enterprise—especially as the wind

increased and kicked up larger and larger waves.

The stout-hearted sea-beasts battled the waves and current for several hours before finally succumbing to a bone-tiredness that steadily robbed them of their strength. Giving up the struggle for the time being, Roolo and Bomper slumped in the keelboat and feel asleep. Drifting on the current, the keelboat carried the sea-beasts far down the coast. After several hours of peacefully drifting on the current, the violent pitching and rolling of their boat awakened the sea-beasts. Large waves, driving their boat toward the shore, had turned their craft parallel to the waves, making it roll dangerously.

The sorry state of their oars left Roolo and Bomper ill-prepared to deal with the emergency. “Broadside to the waves, we don’t stand a chance!” Roolo cried. With no way to change that situation, the sea soon proved him correct. Their wildly pitching boat capsized, tossing Roolo and Bomper into the water.

Dodging the keelboat tossing on the waves, the sea-beasts struggled to shore as best they could. Slogging up on a wide sandy beach, the sea-beasts dropped to the sand, panting. Surveying their situation, they noticed they had landed on an extremely wide beach extending most of the way around a small cove.

As they caught their breath, their keelboat was also being tossed toward the beach, and soon they had landed it securely on the sand.

“What now?” Bomper sighed, feeling clueless about what to do.

“Don’t know,” Roolo replied, “don’t rightly know where we are, which makes it hard to know where to go.”

“We were pushed to shore from that direction,” Bomper said, tracing the path that had landed them on the beach. “My guess is that we rode the current down the coast from the same direction.”

“Makes sense to me,” Roolo agreed, “but that still doesn’t tell us what to do now.”

“Well,” Bomper said, grinning sheepishly, “I think we’ve shown that we’re not very good sailors with our current vessel! I’d recommend we try our luck walking for a while.”

Roolo agreed that the prospects of success with their keelboat were not promising. “I say we stick with our original plan to seek help with repairing *Dream*,” he suggested. “If we find beasts as can help us with that, we may also get help with finding our mates.”

“Let’s pull our boat up on the beach beyond the high-tide line,” Bomper added. “That way, it will be here if we decide we need to come back this way—we don’t know what lies ahead, and we may think that ’ol slug of a boat looks pretty good sometime.” Working hard, they succeeded in pulling the heavy keelboat far across the sand to a point where it was safe from being washed back to sea by the tide. Then, deciding that the best likelihood of finding help was to go

inland, they traveled away from the beach along what appeared to be the easiest route upward through the steep, rocky hills rising away from the beach.

Walking all day, Roolo and Bomper noted that the air, which had seemed mild and fresh on the beach, became colder and damper as they ascended higher into the hills. As sunset approached, the sky took on a deep red-orange color as the sun settled behind an increasing veil of clouds. Roolo and Bomper, sea-beasts to the heart, knew practically nothing about traveling on land and even less about sustaining themselves without a ship's cook. Miserably hungry and thirsty, having taken their last food and water aboard *Daring Dream,* they halted under the protection of a large solitary pine tree. The protection afforded by the tree against hunger and thirst, however, was limited to the numerous nobby pinecones scattered beneath the tree.

The ravenous sea-beasts were just beginning to consider pounding the pinecones with rocks to try to soften them up a bit, when the faint, but unmistakable, scent of cooking fish wafted past them. Exchanging glances of astonished happiness, Roolo and Bomper ran off in the direction from which the smell seemed to be coming. Coming around a huge boulder, they found a young Cow crouched before a cookfire. The young beast had made camp in a small pocket of sheltered ground. Protected on one side by the boulder and overhung by a rock ledge, the snug little campsite looked very inviting to the troubled sea-beasts. Tired, dirty, and so thirsty they could barely speak, yet somehow this did not dampen their greeting as they approached the Cow rocking on her haunches before the fire.

Almost shouting with joy, Bomper called out a greeting, "Holo! Hey! Look here!"

"Ah, there! So there are beasts in this waste," the Cow responded, returning the greeting. "Name's Helga and I'd thought there wasn't a beast within miles—haven't seen anyone in two days." Motioning for her visitors to sit down, she continued, "Sit down. Take a rest. I got some fish I'm happy to share and there's a spring of fresh water over there."

"Ancient Ones, be thanked!" Roolo said. "Things are looking better!"

"The water in the spring runs pretty cold," Helga said. "I've got some more fish over there. Go over to the little pool where the spring runs and you'll see a leather bag held under the water by a rock. The fish are wrapped in corn husks inside—keeps them fresh. Bring them over here and we'll throw some more fish on the fire. I've got plenty."

It was not far from tears of joy that seemed to cloud the eyes of the sea-beasts as they followed Helga's instructions. Having nearly given

themselves up to enduring a long night of hunger and thirst, watching Helga preparing the fish made them doubly thankful for her open-handed generosity. Hanging the fish over a makeshift spit made from tree branches, Helga cooked enough fish to satisfy everyone's hunger.

"I'm glad I finally found you," Helga remarked as she handed around the fried fish and dried cherries that made up her simple meal. "I've been calling on the Ancient Ones to help me find you."

"You knew we were coming?" Roolo said with surprise, greedily attacking the fish with his fingers.

"No, I didn't know you were coming," Helga laughed, "but I am looking for some sea-beasts in trouble—and I seem to have found some!"

Exchanging stories as they chewed and drank their coffee, the three beasts laughed and joked as the night deepened. Finally, the conversation dropped off into broken, fitful comments as the beasts settled into their own tired reflections. All probably would have dropped off to sleep had the wind not begun to pick up. Threatening clouds had been building all evening and now they cut loose with a cold, driving rain. Pushed by the strong wind, even Helga's protected campsite was not sufficient to provide shelter. Sharp, driving raindrops, nearly cold as ice, pelted the three beasts viciously. Worse, the driving rain soon produced a torrent running down from the rocky hills, flooding the campsite.

"Nothing to do but sleep up on the rocks," Helga announced, "we won't stay any drier here than we will out in the rain—might as well try to get out of the flood!"

Taking the lead, Helga climbed up the bare rock like the seasoned mountain dweller she was. Feeling her way along in the dark, she found a fairly broad and flat place to stop safely. Roolo and Bomper followed, scrambling up the rocks. Wishing for a tent, a cave, even a good clump of bushes to break the force of the driving rain, but having nothing by their stout hearts to protect them, they settled down, backs to the rain and heads tucked, to wait for dawn.

# Christer's Plan

Driving rain had pelted the struggling band of travelers since morning. Soaking in through every gap in the heavily-tarred storm-capes they wore, the cold rain added misery to every step Helga and her sea-beast companions took. More than a day of tramping had brought the party no closer than halfway to Dismal Pass, despite their urgent need to reach the sea-beast's grounded ship. Soaked and exhausted from the difficult climb up the steep, jagged road to Dismal Pass, the struggling band needed to find shelter soon.

"There, Mr. Tigg, there!" called out Bomper Spits loudly to Roolo Tigg, the Muskrat Mate who served as leader of the group.

Roolo peered intently through the rain, shading his eyes against the pelting drops. "Maybe, Mr. Spits, maybe," he replied, seeming more to sense what Bomper was pointing out than to actually see it. "You lead the way, Mr. Spits, I'm only lucky enough to see my own nose. This cartnapp-wolloper-digglebust rain will blind me in both ears if it don't let up soon!"

As they moved on, Helga became aware of what had drawn Bomper's attention. It was not a sight, but a sound—a faint *clink-clink-clink* as if small stones were being tossed. The clinking pattern was unnatural. Surely some beast was making the sound. Who was it? And why?

It did not take long to discover the source of the sound. As the band of travelers proceeded, the direction of the sound became more certain, and following the sounds, Bomper led the group off the road and up a deep and narrow rocky ravine. They had not gone more than a dozen paces when there was a sudden movement and an explosive *WHING-WHOOP-WHIZZ* noise. To everyone's astonishment, Bomper was suspended about thirty feet in the air!

"Flamin' bee-whimmers! What a ride!" Bomper laughed, cradled neatly in a net sack made of heavy-cord. The sack obviously had no exit, the top being pulled tightly closed by ropes. Bomper's footsteps had triggered some manner of trap, and a very effective one it was. In addition to the sack being tightly closed, he was too far in the air for his friends to be of much immediate help. It would take some considerable thought to get him down safely.

Twisting slowly in the driving rain thirty-feet in the air, his

comrades calling to him anxiously, Bomper realized his predicament was not simply fleeting fun. He had just reached this realization and gathered some choice oaths to hurl at his comrades, when his sack began to rise rapidly. Someone was pulling on the rope from which Bomper was suspended.

Bomper's ascent was so rapid that he had no time to gather his wits. In short order, the sack that held him captive was hauled into a wide, roomy cave running deep into the side of the ravine. "Quite a sorry thing, old binger!" said a short, squat Coyote with a red handlebar moustache, flashing dark eyes, and a jovial smile as he quickly opened the sack and released Bomper. A snug-fitting cap was pulled low over his head and he wore coarse dungarees and a heavy homespun shirt.

"Can't be too careful—there's Wrackshees running all about. The track through the ravine is one they used to use sometimes. He-He-He...but I put an end to that...He-He-He. My warning trap lets them know they had best not go further or they'll set off my boulder dropper. He-He-He. Yes, well, at least you didn't set off my boulder dropper—but, then, that's got to be triggered by more than the likes of such a scrawny bone-bags as you."

The Coyote's dark eyes flashed with merriment. "But, even so, old binger, I think I'll disconnect the trigger rope on the boulder dropper —wouldn't want to be a bad host. They're really quite nice boulders—the Wrackshees pretty well leave me alone. He-He-He."

The Coyote walked over to where a number of thick ropes were looped through a series of iron rings pegged deeply into the cave wall. The ropes went off in different directions. "Let's see—the boulder dropper would be the blue one." Grasping a rope with a blue mark painted on it, he tied the rope securely with a complex knot.

"There," the Coyote said turning back to Bomper. "Your friends down there would think I was a very bad host," the Coyote chuckled, "if they triggered the boulder dropper. He-He-He. Well, yes—how about a pot of Wheeze and a few shells of Slicker to welcome you to my humble home? But I suppose I should invite your friends to have some, too. So, if you will just step over to the hearth and make yourself at home, I'll bring your friends up in a wink." The Coyote motioned to a sturdy cobblestone fire circle that had been built to one side of the cave. Piles of soft pounded-bark blankets invited lounging around a small, cheery fire. A sharp but inviting aroma came from a blackened copper pot, bubbling and steaming as it hung from an iron tripod above the fire. The pungent aroma from the pot added a twang to the dominant odor of wood smoke that clung to everything in the cave. A haze of smoke swirled across the roof of the cave as it slowly found its way to the cave opening, where wisps slipped away to the

outside.

Soon Helga and Roolo joined Bomper in the cave. An amazing and well-designed system of simple pulleys enabled the warning trap to lift considerable loads. Once in the cave, all slumped under blankets or crouched as near to the fire as they dared, trying to force the deep, biting cold from their bodies. When the band of travelers had settled comfortably in the cave, the Coyote asked for quiet, went to the cave entrance and listened for any telltale change in the noises of the falling night that might betray Wrackshee movements. Hearing nothing unusual, he carefully reset the warning trap repeating, as before, “Can’t be too careful.”

Having completed these security measures, the Coyote walked near the fire, pulling off his cap and hanging it on a peg as he went. Helga noted the Coyote’s ears were painted and notched in a style she had never seen before. What it signified she could not guess and gave it no further thought as the Coyote began to speak.

Using a long-handled ladle, he filled several iron mugs with the bubbling brew from the copper pot. Dropping a spoon of honey into each mug, and sprinkling some crumbled, dried herbs on top of each one, he handed the mugs around.

“Borallt welcomes you to his humble lodge. I was not expecting such grand company so I have only a little Plenty Toot Wheeze prepared and only a few mugs. But such comrades as we surely are will not mind sharing. Fortunately I just returned from a trading trip to Port Newolf. Those packs in the corner is filled with the best Slickers around—and there’s plenty for all!”

Helga soon learned that Slickers were the largest oysters she had ever seen. Their thick rough shells—the size of small plate—were highly prized for the morsels of tender, delicious flesh inside. Despite their rough appearance, Slicker shells popped open easily and soon the band was popping Slicker shells open and greedily “slicking down” the sweet, slimy meat with abandon.

As the Slicker feast progressed, Borallt showed his guests his preferred means of discarding Slicker shells. With but a little practice, they learned how to toss a Slicker shell a distance across the cave, bounce it off a particular spot of wall, and have the shell go zinging off into the ravine below. *Clink-clink-clink*. *Clink-clink-clink*. If the Slicker meat itself were not so delicious, the sheer sport of scattering the shells would be sufficient to make the oysters a treat.

Gradually, the warmth of the fire, the sharp taste of the Wheeze, and the fullness of their bellies brought quiet to the tired band of travelers. After they talked, joked, and cursed the weather, Helga and Roolo questioned their Coyote host about his solitary life. They learned he survived by trapping snakes and selling bales of snake skins

to traders in Port Newolf. When they began to inquire about the best way to get through Dismal Pass without risking capture by the Wrackshees, he chuckled again.

"He-He-He...I know another way," Borallt said as he listened to their urgent queries. "You dare not go through Dismal Pass," he continued. "I came through there this very morning and the grass on either side of the road had been trampled to muddy pulp. The ashes of many cook fires and the scooped out skins of roasted lizards were everywhere. That means Wrackshees—lots of them." The old Coyote chuckled again. "He-He-He...You go through Dismal Pass, you'll be a Wrackshee slave...He-He-He!"

Helga was puzzled. How could Borallt laugh about such bad news? But every time she or Roolo tried to ask him a question, he would only chuckle and mutter that he "knew another way." It made Helga restless.

"Soon it's going to be cold, brutally cold, in the Pass," Borallt said at last. "That cold rain that your sea-beasts suffered through—that was the lucky part. The Needle Rain is coming. The cold rain just keeps getting colder and raining harder and harder, until the rain freezes into tiny shards of ice. Call it snow if you want—but it's sharp enough to draw blood. I'll make you a promise that the Wrackshees will be sitting warm in their camp in the High Boulders. That's the only sheltered campsite where they can sit out a Needle Rain storm and still control the main passage on the road. They'll sit there in their tents, tight and warm 'till the storm blows out. No beast will be able to get past them—and no beast is likely to try during the storm—but they won't be moving either. He-He-He..."

"We can't just sit here!" Helga said with frustration. "I don't care how long the Wrackshees sit warm in their tents. I want us to move!"

"He-He-He..." the Coyote chuckled again, sipping the first mug of another batch of Plenty Toot Wheeze he had been stirring. "He-He-He...well, well...so you think I should rush right out and show you the way, do you?" Slowly taking another sip of his Wheeze, Borallt stood up and went to the rear of the cave where the flickering firelight gave way to deepening shadows.

"Christer! Hey-lo! Christer! Now!" Borallt called out into the darkness at the rear of the cave.

"Unless I miss my guess that would be your way out," he said, returning to his seat by the fire. With a slight bow as he approached the group, a tall, slender Wood Cow, in dirty and worn barkskins, came out of the darkness and dropped to the floor, sitting cross-legged near Borallt. The young Wood Cow, about Helga's age, gave a surprised glace at Helga, as he sat down. He seemed to be as astonished as was Helga herself to find another Wood Cow clan in

such a place, so far removed from the Wood Cow homeland!

Borallt explained that the young Wood Cow known as Christer was his trapping partner. “Sorry to wake you, Christer, I know you have been up the last two nights checking traps before the storm hits, but these travelers need to know what you’ve seen. What can you tell them?”

“There are many breezes stirring,” Christer replied. “Lots of beasts are camped in the mountains—many more than the Wrackshees. The monitor caravans have been delayed for weeks and are still not able to run—the roads being flooded. No one knows when the weather will break, so everyone waits. The Wrackshee Bozz is camped up at High Boulders waiting like everyone else for the weather to allow the trading to begin. As soon as the Needle Rains pass, the slave-bidders will surround him like flies on rotting meat. It will be a hell’s-brew of shabby cheating and fighting, wretched slaves, half-witted trallé drivers, madness, and wild-eyed greed—no place for a decent beast.”

Christer paused to yawn and take a stretch, then continued. “On the other hand, I heard something very interesting along the trap lines—I ate some Flamin’ Pike and Crusts with Mirty Tee in his camp one night. He had seen a strange group of travelers—a male Wood Cow and Owl, and a female Cougar—over on the Far Slope heading down the Wrackshee Coast. They was moving in broad daylight, just as big as life—a dangerous business that—they don’t call it the Wrackshee Coast for nothing. Only a beast without a lick of good sense, or crazy with desperation, would travel the Wrackshee Coast in daylight. There’s danger a-plenty even in the dark. But that’s just it—the High One and his blightin’ bilge-sucking buzzards won’t let anyone trade with the Wood Cows. Makes it impossible for a lot of Wood Cows to make a livin’ or have a future—which is why I came out looking for something new and ended up working with Borallt. Anyway—the Wood Cow, name of Breister, told me he’d heard there was a terrible shipwreck up on the coast and the crew’s in a terrible fix.”

“Share out some more Wheeze, Borallt!” yelled Mr. Tigg. “That will be our mates! Whoop! Zallarooo!”

“And that will be my father!” Helga hollered. The news threw Helga’s mind into turmoil. In the shadows cast by the firelight on the cave walls, Helga seemed to see the stricken ship, with shadowy bands of Wrackshee slavers flickering all around them.

Trembling in every nerve—passionate fear, terrifying memories, and excitement mingling in a potent outburst of enthusiasm—Helga suddenly leaped up and ran to the cave opening, beckoning for the others to follow. “Come on! Why do we wait? Hurry! There is no time to waste!” Seeing that her friends just stared at her as they continued to lounge around the fire, rage and astonishment surged through

Helga. “Are you dead? Senseless? Do we plan to let our friends become slaves? Come with me, or I will go alone! We must act without delay!” Helga exploded. “The sailors need our help and all of them are in the greatest danger!”

“Whoa n’ wait a bit,” Christer said slowly, “just hold on while we figure a bit. There’s no time to waste, that’s for certain, and I’m fully agreed with you there—but there’s room for figuring to even up the odds a bit, if you ask me.” Christer paused, clucking his tongue happily, as if he had just told a joke no one else understood.

“What’s first,” Christer continued, “...what’s first, is that you can go the way the Sn’akers go and beat the Wrackshees at their own game. The Sn’akers’ business is to elude the Wrackshees and no one does it better. A party of Sn’akers stops near here tonight to pick up our snakeskin bales and take them to Port Newolf. If you don’t mind riding with the bales of skins, they can carry you, too! That’d be the fastest and safest way to get to the wrecked ship. If they’ve got room in one of their litters, the Sn’akers will gladly take you with them—they hate the Wrackshees and will be happy to help.”

“Yar!” Roolo cheered. “Now we’ll be out of here and off to help our mates! When will the Snake-takers be here?”

“Hold on partner,” Christer replied, “you’re not going anywhere fast. Only Helga can go with the Sn’akers—their litters will be pretty full as it is and they won’t have room for you all. And only the Snake-takers can run swift, but silent in the dark—too many is too much in Wrackshee country. So you just settle down with your Wheeze and rest a spell.”

“What!” Roolo cried. “Stay here, while our mates are in danger and send Helga out to face the Wrackshees alone? That’s crazy!”

“Just hear what’s second,” Christer replied. “Helga going with the Snake-takers will get her to the ship and maybe to her father. So, while Helga takes the faster route to the ship, you and Bomper can take a longer route around and meet her there. You’ll be plenty safe skirting around the Wrackshee areas and you’ll still be at the ship in good time. So that’s my two thoughts.”

Although everyone wanted to continue the journey together, they also saw the wisdom in Christer’s plan.

“Aye,” Roolo said, “there’s no reason to run unnecessary risk and Helga has the most to gain from going on ahead. We’ll meet again at the ship.”

“Heh-heh-heh,” Christer chuckled, “so it’s settled. An hour after the twilight turns to dark, we leave to meet the Snake-takers.”

# Scrodder's Tattoo

Christer and Helga picked their way across a rough, scree slope, carefully following an old miner's track that cut downward across a mountainside. They moved as quietly as possible through the intense dark of a clear, but moonless night, with Christer padding along in the lead. His keen night vision astonished Helga, as he pointed out objects she was completely unable to see in the darkness until they had moved considerably closer. Christer's confidence in the dark allowed him to move quickly, despite being loaded with large bundles of snake skins strapped to a willow-frame carrier on his back.

Christer trotted along lightly, almost soundlessly, his heels hardly touching the ground. Helga struggled to keep up, stumbling along noisily, often tripping over rocks or losing her footing on the scree.

"Arrgh!" Helga fumed, losing her balance again and nearly taking a long slide down the slope.

"Christer—how much further?" Helga whispered, picking herself back up. "I'm afraid that all the racket I'm making with draw the Wrackshees down on our heads!"

"Shat, Helga!" Christer replied, "we're nearly at the bottom, and anyway, can't you see them? Can't you hear them?" Motioning for her to stop, he cupped his ear as if listening. Helga stopped and strained her own ears, but noticed nothing unusual. The smile spreading across Christer's face, however, told her that whatever it was that had caught his attention was good news.

"Snake-takers," Christer said, grinning.

With that hint, more because she could see some shadowy forms ahead then because she could hear anything distinctly, Helga realized that they had, indeed, rendezvoused with the Snake-takers. As she and Christer drew nearer, Helga could make out brawny figures—some with arms and legs like logs—lounging and resting in every imaginable position.

Christer started downward again, following the track to the spot where the scree ended and the troop of Snake-takers had halted. Helga followed, overjoyed to think that the long night's journey might at last be ending, stumbling and sliding behind Christer as fast as she could, no longer concerned about her noisy advance. She paid a price, however, for her haste and once again lost her balance, pitching

forward and dancing and leaping the rest of the way down the slope to keep from falling hard.

Reaching the bottom of the slope, Helga bounded past Christer, arms windmilling wildly, as her momentum carried her on. Finally coming to a stop, breathing hard, she slowly made her way back to where Christer stood with a strongly-muscled, burly Climbing Lynx. Giving them a big, yellow-toothed smile—cheeks bulging out like balloons, a dirty straw hat pushed to the back of her head, belly hanging over a large silver belt buckle, crumpled jeans, lizard-skin boots—the Lynx pulled a leather pouch out of her pocket and opened it. Pulling several dried weevils out and tossing them into her mouth, the Lynx crunched the hard dried husks with gusto, offering the pouch to Christer and Helga.

"Go on now, beasties, they're shur'in not a-gonna bite you," the Lynx laughed. "These crunchy little guys help to keep you awake, travelin' all night, and they stick to your ribs right well!"

Helga watched the Lynx toss probably two dozen of the hard-dried weevils into her mouth as she talked. As she looked around, Helga could make out others of the Snake-takers also eating and drinking, taking advantage of the break to nourish and refresh themselves. They were clearly a lean and hardened lot, tough and seasoned by years of running the snake-taking routes through the mountains. Although she had always heard stories about the strenuous life and legendary stamina of such mountain traders, she had never really wondered what such active beasts ate to keep up their strength.

But now, observing the first Snake-takers she had ever seen, it was clear that Snake-takers were not fussy. Pouches holding every type of dried insect and bug were being passed from beast to beast, with the loud *Crunch-Crack-Crunch* of hard cockroach nuts being eaten making a faint staccato amidst the laughter and talk of the relaxing beasts. Here and there other beasts gnawed on huge crystallized knobs of pine pitch—which, to Helga, looked like they were chewing on the heel of a boot. Still other beasts were scoffing on great wads of pine branch tips, putting one sweet, woody shoot after another in their mouths and grinding them fiercely with their teeth, cheeks puffing out with gobs of pulverized material sucked on for nutrients. And, regardless of the favored snack, every beast drank from the lake—flattening on their bellies, sticking mouths in the water, and slurping deep draughts.

"Helga, meet Darnt," Christer said, introducing the Lynx. "She's the trader who deals with the Snake-takers in these parts—knows the mountains well and will see that the Snake-takers get you through safely to the coast. She says the mountains are crawling with Wrackshees now."

"Yash, Christer! Wrackshees everywhere! No one moves except in

great danger now. Even you may not get out alive if you return the way you came. Sn'akers say they must keep moving—stop only for brief rest—they must keep moving, travel light—no heavy food or water packs—only what they can carry. They must keep moving—travel by night only. The Sn'akers must go now. You must go with them! Wrackshees are just behind!"

"Me?" Christer exclaimed. "I can't go with them—there is no way I could keep up with their pace. I would delay them too much—I'll go my own way back."

"Nash! There is no way back tonight!" Darnt replied. Then, she pointed toward the night sky, calling Christer's attention to various constellations, talking rapidly all the while. "Yash there, Christer!" she said, pointing towards an area of the western sky. "Yash! Scrodder's Tattoo! The Heart of Ink guides the Sn'akers through the Dismal Drain—that's the only way passable and safe. There's Wrackshees swarming down behind you across the ridges now. They nearly caught even me a while back, except that I was hunkered down behind a crag, and in the pitch black, wind blowing away from me, they missed me. Had they caught my scent, I'd be a slave now."

"The Dismal Drain! You're out or your mind, Darnt! I've known more beasts to go in there than to come back out," Christer exclaimed. "The Drain's a wasteland—solid, barren sandstone, and fierce wind blowing all the time—there's no way to follow a track. Even if there were a bit of dust to follow a track, the wind erases it in minutes. I've heard of lots of beasts that go in there and never come out...they say the mirages in the daytime trick beasts—making them think they see a way out, but they really just wander and wander, day after day, following mirage after mirage, until they run out of water and die. I'd rather face the Wrackshees than just leave my bones to bleach out in the Drain." Christer knew that the Drain—made of dazzling white sandstone polished to a mirror-like surface by the constant wind carrying fine particles of the eroding sand—was a death trap.

"Yash, Christer," Darnt replied, "that's why you must go with the Sn'akers—they follow the Heart of Ink—that's the only way—and travel only by night. In the daytime, even if you ignore the mirages—which most beasts can't—the sunlight dazzles so brightly off the white sandstone of the Drain that you can't find directions anyway. Nash—travel only by night. The Sn'akers set their course on the Heart of Ink, the brightest star in Scrodder's Tattoo, and keep moving by night and hiding by day. I've made arrangements for them to take you and Helga through to the coast—and that's your only way out now. Take it or die a slave at Tilk Duraow!"

Pointing toward Scrodder's Tattoo, Darnt continued, "There, you see it—the Heart of Ink is almost at the center of the Tattoo, but hangs

almost by itself in the blackness around it." Darnt paused briefly, then repeated, "Sn'akers find their way by the Heart of Ink. Hide and sleep during the day, travel only at night. That will take you across the Dismal Drain in safety. Tonight is the most dangerous portion of the trip—by morning you will be across the mountains and beyond the main Wrackshee areas, still dangerous but the worst will be over."

"I reckon you're about right, Darnt," Christer replied with a smile, "but I don't want to slow them down, and I can't keep up the pace—especially in the dark."

"Nash, Christer," Darnt replied, "Sn'akers carry you and Helga in the pole-rolls. The Wrackshees have kept most honest beasts from traveling for now, so they've got enough empty space in the pole-packs for the two of you. Go with them to Port Newolf and you can find your way home from there."

Darnt paused as the Sn'aker leader barked out a command, "Going! Now! Quick to the packs! Bring the pole-pack over here!"

In an instant the Snake-takers were on their feet and again lifting their packs into place—two large packs per snake-taker, one to the front, the other to the back, sturdy straps connecting the packs securely across the shoulders and around the waist. Snake-takers were renowned for strength and endurance and this band of mountain beasts was no exception to the rule: most were so tall and brawny that their huge packs appeared small against their bodies. The powerful arms and legs of Zanists and Pogwaggers pulsated with readiness—iron-spring muscles quivering for their leader's command to go. Seemingly tireless when on a trading run, Zanists and Pogwaggers needed only ten hours to take their cargo sixty miles, including rest stops. Helga could easily see the intense coiled energy that would carry her and Christer quickly across the mountains to the coast.

Helga noticed that the Sn'akers had once been well clad—cotton pants reaching half way down the thigh, a cotton shirt, open in front except for loose lacing to keep it from flapping in the breeze, and triple-layer soft leather moccasins on their feet. But that had apparently been at the beginning of their trip, as now only bits and pieces of clothing were still in use. It took many partially-clad beasts to guess at the full-picture of what the troop normally wore before the exertion of their labor caused their clothes to begin to come off piece by piece. By the time they had been running for several hours, racing over the mountain paths, the Snake-takers needed hardly any clothes to keep them warm, even in the coolness of the mountain nights. Proud of their speed, and knowing no other kind of life than this, most Snake-takers, by the time they had run an hour or so, wore little more cloth covering them than was needed to signify a decent beast.

Three brawny young Pogwaggers, two Grizzly Bears and a Horse—

perfectly matched in height and bulk—trotted over to where Darnt stood with Helga and Christer. Helga could see that the youthful Sn'akers were barely older than herself, but the harsh work of a Sn'aker runner had clearly taken its toll, leaving their faces looking worn and aged beyond their years.

Two long hollow poles ran across the shoulders of the three powerful Snake-takers. Sturdy reed mats slung on the poles—two before and two after the middle Pogwagger— formed teardrop-shaped sacks. Kneeling down, the Pogwaggers allowed the sacks to touch the ground, opening the sacks to their fullest extent.

"Climb in," Darnt said, motioning for Helga and Christer to wriggle in at the open end of the sacks.

"But when the pack carriers get up, we won't be able to move!" Helga exclaimed. "The pack will close tight around us and we'll just have to lie there like a bound-up bundle until the Pogwaggers stop again and let us out! What kind of way to travel is that?" Helga was astonished at such treatment.

"Nash, my good beastie," Darnt replied, "and what would you expect from traveling with a snake-trading run? They've got to move fast and careful in the dark—they can't have passengers shifting around and getting themselves comfortable, it makes the packs wobble. That's too hard on the runners—slows the runners and it's dangerous on mountain trails. The runners got to control their cargo—not the other way around! That's the way it is." Darnt looked seriously at Helga, then continued, "You want to make yourself comfy, then you get yourself to the coast by yourself. You go with the Sn'akers, you go their way."

Looking sorrowfully at Christer, Helga shrugged and knelt down to crawl into one of the pole-sacks. She was surprised to find it was already occupied. Looking at Darnt in confusion, she pointed to the sack next to the one she had first approached. "Snake-takers get two hours off to rest," she explained. "There's a few of the runners resting while the others are running. Sn'akers keep a couple of slots open for those who get injured or sick—or to let passengers on urgent business ride if we can. That would be you," she chuckled. "Come on there, friend," she continued, "wake up and get back to work!"

The Zanist who had been sleeping in the pole-sack got up and, shaking out his arms and legs, prepared to go back to work as a runner. "There ya are," Darnt said, "climb on in there—one of you on each side. They will fill the front two pole-sacks with snakeskin bales to balance the load. Now get on in there and settle in for the ride."

Sighing with resignation and casting one last longing gaze at the night sky, Helga crawled into the open pole-sack indicated by Darnt. Christer wriggled into another. Helga was hardly straightened out in

her sack when the command to depart was given, “Going! Now! Quick on your stumps! Lively and forward!”

With an amazingly smooth lift, the Zanists and Pogwaggers leaped to their feet in unison and set off at a rapid trot. The evenness and synchronized harmony of their movement created only the slightest rocking motion to Helga’s sack. The gentle swaying and soft padding of the runners feet in their triple-layer soft leather moccasins soon soothed Helga into a deep sleep.

# Sn'aker Turncoats

"SCHNOOCT...SNUZZYT...SNORKETOOO..." Helga didn't know how long she had been sleeping, when the strange whistle awakened her. "SNORKETOOO... SCHZUNCT..." The whistle seemed very loud, almost in her ear, but being encased tightly in the pole-roll, she could not see the source of the noise.

"SZZCHOONCT...SNUZZZYT...SNORCKTOO..." A distant responding whistle, in a slightly different key! Signals of some sort! This realization had no sooner come to Helga, then….ZZZZ-AAAASHH! A sudden flash of brilliant light so intense that Helga's eyes blinked against it, even within her pole-sack! ZZZZ-AAAASHH! Another flash of intense light!

"AAAIEEEE! AVIAFIAS!" Immediately after the first flash of light, chaos broke loose in the Sn'aker party. "AVIAFIAS! AVIAFIAS! RUN!" The confused, terrified cries came from all directions. Helga could hear the snake-carriers dropping their cargo poles and running helter-skelter. She knew of Aviafias—Vultures assigned to aerial security around *Maev Astuté,* the immense castle of the High One, ruler of the Hedgelands across the mountains. But she'd never heard of Aviafias anywhere but around *Maev Astuté*. What did it mean?

As pandemonium and confusion dispersed the main group of Sn'akers, Helga realized that the runners carrying her pole-roll suddenly swerved in a new direction and picked up their pace to a furious run. Why were her runners not panicking and running for cover? Something was wrong—what was going on? The answer came quickly.

"YAR-AHHH! STOP THEM! ZARASHT! AFTER THEM!" The confusion among the Sn'akers had turned into angry shouts and cursing. Although she still could not see what was going on, apparently the main Sn'aker party had now understood the reason for the Aviafia's arrival. Whatever was happening, the runners bearing her pole-sack were now racing along at maximum speed, with other Sn'akers in hot pursuit. "YAR-AHHHH! THE EDGE! STOP! STOP! DON'T JUMP!" Helga's rising panic, fed by the frantic shouts of the Sn'akers, told her that she was now being carried toward the edge of some precipice, like some helpless piece of cargo.

Throwing her weight side-to-side, Helga tried desperately to knock

her runners off balance. Her pole-sack began to sway back and forth wildly, gaining momentum. She could feel Christer doing the same in his sack. The powerful Pogwaggers slowed their pace as they struggled to deal with the now violently swinging sacks. Throwing every ounce of strength into the effort, Helga and Christer tried mightily to slow the runners enough to allow the other pursuing Sn'akers to catch up. With a final push, Helga felt the balance shift as the runners were knocked off their feet. Too late, Helga realized that all this accomplished was to send the entire group of runners and passengers flying out over the edge of the precipice. Making a long, wide arc, they sailed out of sight.

Amidst the chaotic tumble over the edge of the precipice, the runners let go of the poles and Helga fell free from the sack that had carried her. Tumbling wildly, Helga, Christer and their Pogwagger carriers dropped rapidly. Frantically glancing about, Helga sized up her situation. Brilliant flares still brighly illuminated in the night—apparently dropped by the Aviafias and now swinging slowly to earth on parachutes. Helga could see a river shimmering with a faint silver glow far below and coming up fast toward her. She fought to control her panic. Not trusting the depth of the water and wanting to protect herself against possible rocks, she pulled herself tightly into a ball, pulling her knees tight to her chest with one arm and protecting her tucked head with the other.

Moments later—KER-SPLOOSH—Helga hit the water with a perfect 'cannonball dive' and sank several feet below the surface of the river. As soon as she bobbed back to the surface, she quickly surveyed her surroundings. Surprised to note that the water was not freezing cold, she was calmed by the realization that the current was flowing at a slow, almost lazy rate. The Pogwaggers who had been carrying her had landed about 30 feet away. Although uncertain about why the runners had put her in this situation, she sensed that she could not trust them and her instinct told her to flee. She turned quickly away from them, intending to swim away, but stopped short instead.

Not far away she saw Christer bobbing in the water. What did it mean? Why had the Pogwaggers apparently run over the edge with their pole-packs? She did not have long to wonder. In the fading illumination from the flares far above, she could make out a large willow-bark boat, escorted by more than a dozen woven-reed kayaks, heading directly toward them from shore. Helga did not have to be told who these new arrivals were—the stench was unmistakable. Wrackshees! Fierce-faced, stinking with a gut-wrenching stench, and heavily-armed with dozens of small razor-sharp throwing lances carried in bandoliers slung over their shoulders, there was no mistaking who was coming for a visit. Two Aviafias also stood on the

deck of the boat.

Helga knew there was no escape. Bowing her head toward the oncoming Wrackshees in an obvious sign of surrender and submission, Helga paddled slowly toward Christer.

"What do you think's going on?" Christer whispered, when Helga reached him.

"Sn'aker turncoats, it seems," Helga replied grimly. "Looks like they're giving the Wrackshees a couple of slaves and some bales of very valuable snakeskins—not a bad haul, without the Wrackshees having to raise a finger."

"So you think we were sold out, eh?" Christer said.

"Sure looks that way to me," Helga replied. "This was planned—whistled signals, the Aviafias dropping flares to confuse the Sn'akers and provide light for the runners to carry us over the edge, then quickly back to darkness to cover the escape…yes, this was well-planned."

Their conversation ended as the first of the Wrackshee kayaks arrived and surrounded them, throwing lances drawn and at the ready should the captives try to resist or escape. Neither had the least thought of trying anything so foolhardy. Offering no resistance, Helga and Christer allowed themselves to be lifted onto the willow-bark boat, where they were made to sit with their backs to the gunwales while their arms were threaded through a series of iron rings and then their bodies chained securely—a slaving boat!

Soon, however, Helga and Christer's feelings of discouragement were replaced by surprise and shock. One by one, the turncoat Sn'akers were being lifted onto the boat and tied to the gunwales exactly the same fashion as were Helga and Christer! The Sn'aker turncoats apparently were captives also!

An uproar at the rear of the boat caught Helga's attention. A burly Grizzly Pogwagger was being dragged from the river by means of several stout ropes that had been tossed around her. A crowd of Wrackshees on the boat, together with several more in kayaks, were trying to contain the angry beast and pull her aboard the boat. The powerful Pogwagger struggled wildly against the pull of the ropes.

"GIT YA PAWS OFF ME, YA SCUM-N-BARFERS! YA STINKIN' MUDBRAINS! TIE ME UP IF'N YA THINKS YA GOT ME, BUT GIT YA PAWS AWAY FROM ME!"

She was not, however, in spite of her spirited audacity, able to break free. A Wrackshee, standing at the railing, raised his arm and, tossing yet another rope, landed it around the neck of the Pogwagger. With her arms already entangled by numerous ropes, the Pogwagger could not stop the new rope from being drawn tightly around her neck.

“Pull hard, pull it hard!” the Wrackshee holding the rope called to several companions. “Silence, stop the struggle, beast, or we will pull until you are dead!” Seeing no slackening in the Grizzly’s struggles, he again roared the command: “Pull hard, pull it hard!”

“AIEEKEEE! GHASPTT!” The Grizzly Pogwagger gasped and spluttered as the rope tightened around her neck. Her frantic struggles gradually subsided as she wheezed for breath. Realizing she would be strangled and drown to no good purpose if she continued battling, the Pogwagger quieted into submission.

Soon she was being hauled over the boat’s railing, then dumped on the deck, gasping for air. Her coarse dark brown fur showed faint red streaks of blood where ropes had torn her hide during her struggle for freedom. Huge black eyes stared angrily at everyone on the boat, and her head, shaved close in Pogwagger style, circled endlessly back and forth, looking for a path of escape. The young Grizzly Pogwagger, yelling loudly at her captors as she was hustled over to the gunwale and tied, fell into sullen silence after she had been lashed beside Helga. As soon as she was tied to the gunwale, the Pogwagger resumed her struggle for freedom. But pulling against her bonds only succeeded in bringing a furious clanking from the cruel irons she now wore.

Helga eyed the Pogwagger with interest. Observing the rippling muscles of her new neighbor, she mused at how the team of powerful Sn’akers had been subdued against their wills, just as she and Christer had been. Curiosity gnawed at her. It was not lack of strength or capacity to elude capture that had made them all Wrackshee captives —there had been no real threat to the Sn’akers up on the trail. The Aviafias were not attacking the Sn’akers and there was no Wrackshee attack force. The reason they were captives was solely that, for some reason, the Pogwagger and her teammates had cooperated with the plan that now had landed them all in irons. Why had they helped the Wrackshees? And why were they also now captives? It made no sense.

Helga looked at the Pogwagger beside her. “Why did you do it?” she asked quietly.

There was no answer. Leaning her head back on the gunwale, the big Grizzly simply closed her eyes as if to go to sleep. Soon the Wrackshees had loaded and secured all their prisoners and stowed the bales of snakeskins aboard their boat.

As the Wrackshee boat and kayaks got underway and moved downstream, the flurry of action temporarily distracted Helga. Her fierce curiosity about the strange occurrences involving herself and the Pogwaggers, however, did not subside. Soon she laid her head, relaxed like, back against the gunwale, and remarked to the Pogwagger beside her, “Well, well, now didn’t we both find out a bit

more about the world—for now we do, and later we don't. And, even when we do as we expected to do, sometimes it turns out we were a little too far to the left, or a little too close on the right. Yes, sir, even when we lay out good plans, life is pretty uncertain and, often, we end up nowhere close to where we set out to be."

The Pogwagger gave Helga a brief, fierce glance, then folded her arms and gazed straight ahead, saying nothing. Although thoroughly silent, the Pogwagger fidgeted restlessly, seemingly bursting with energy she was consciously seeking to control. The Pogwagger's manner suggested that Helga's earlier comment had unsettled her.

Helga's fascination with the strange circumstances she shared with the Pogwagger, and her curiosity about the Pogwagger's own story, made her pursue her earlier comment.

"What a heap of trouble, danger, and disappointment we'd miss in life if everything went according to plan," Helga chuckled, not exactly to the Pogwagger, but to no one else either. "Yes, there's plenty of times I was lucky that the plan I'd made didn't pan out the way I'd hoped—oh yes, sometimes it would've been better if I'd just stopped a bit short of what I'd planned, or thought it over a bit more before I started. Yes, indeed-deed, sometimes there's a demon in the details of the fine plans we make."

"POGS—YOU VARMIT-FACED WOOD COW! YOU'D THINK A ROUNDIE LIKE YOU WOULD UNDERSTAND! POGS!" Roaring out the statement loud enough to wake beasts sleeping miles away, the Grizzly strained so hard against her bonds that Helga thought she'd tear a limb off trying to free herself.

"Whoa, now, there friend," Helga chuckled, "I didn't mean to make you ill in your mind! I was just trying to see if you'd talk to me about what just happened to us."

"TALK TO YOU!" the Pogwagger exploded. "TALK TO A ROUNDIE —A DIRTY, LOW-DOWN POG-BOG FARMER? NO, I WILL NOT TALK TO YOU—I DISPISE YOU UTTERLY AND COMPLETELY. I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY TO YOU!"

A period of silence followed this, which Helga, taken somewhat aback by the unexpected outburst, made no effort to break immediately. After a few minutes, the Pogwagger's agitation gradually decreased. When Helga judged that the Grizzly's breathing was normal once more, she ventured another comment. "I ought to apologize for causing you anger," Helga said, "yet, somehow I feel that I'm about to learn something from you, which I need to know."

Pausing to judge the effect of what she had said, and observing no indication that she was arousing the Pogwagger again, Helga continued. "I was unaware that you harbored ill feelings toward me when I spoke a while ago—but you have shown me that I have

somehow harmed you. I would very much like to learn how that is."

"Pogs," the Grizzly replied slowly, as if considering how many words to use. "You Roundies ruined the Pog-Bogs and have driven all us Pogwaggers to famine and want. You want a reason I hate and despise you—well, there you have it. If I were free I would hope to slit your gut from chin to toe. I should have done it when I had a chance, but I thought seeing you sold into slavery would be better."

This explanation sent Helga's mind reeling. Pogs? Those little annoying frogs whose croaking in the Pog-Bogs kept everyone sleepless during the spring? Pogs? She was sitting here with a well-muscled Grizzly hoping to kill her, because of tiny frogs? How hard the Roundies had worked to drain the Pog-Bogs to open up more space for cornfields, potato patches, and carrot beds. And how soundly the Roundies slept, now that the Pogs were gone. The world was, indeed, a strange and uncertain place.

"But, I've never seen a Pogwagger anywhere near the Rounds. I don't even know anything about Pogwaggers—why, you're about the first Pogwagger I ever saw. All I know is that you Pogwaggers live somewhere in the Drownlands," Helga said. "What do Pogs in the Rounds have to do with you Pogwaggers living somewhere, far away, that I have no idea about?"

"Our clans have lived in Open Wets of the Drownlands for generations," the Grizzly replied, calming down somewhat, but still viewing Helga with disgust. "Our folk used to live by catching Waggers—a big lizard that feeds on full-grown Pogs. There's two kinds of Pogs you have in the Rounds: female Pogs that come back to the Pog-Bogs to lay their eggs and die, and the young, newly-hatched Pogs —what we call Pog-Willies—the ones just a few weeks old. When Pog-Willies reach a certain size, they leave the Pog-Bogs and migrate to the Open Wets of the Drownlands. There, the Waggers feed on them, and our folk catch the Waggers—we eat them and use their skin, claws, and teeth for lots of things." The Grizzly paused and gave Helga an especially harsh look. "That is, that's the way it used to be—when there were still Waggers around."

"What do you mean, when there were still Waggers around," Helga asked.

"When you Roundies drained the Pog-Bogs, that was the end of the Pogs," the Grizzly said in a cold, even voice. "And when the Pogs stopped coming to the Open Wets, the Waggers died off as well—no Pogs, no Waggers; no Waggers, and we Pogwaggers go hungry." The Grizzly stopped and looked sadly away, as if visiting another place in her mind.

"When I was a small beast," she continued, "I lived in a bag-house —that's a lizard skin tent—with my parents, my grandmother, my

brothers and sisters, and, usually about 20 Waggers. Yep, we kept the Waggers in cages at one end of the tent and we lived at the other. Waggers are extremely hard to capture. Sometimes you're having a good day and catch several—and that might be all you'll be able to catch for weeks, so you want to keep them! Grandmother always kept a swamp grass fire burning in the middle of our bag-house. She would cook up a thick porridge of swamp cabbage, Wagger meat, and wild pumpkins in a large cauldron, and let it simmer all day. I swear, just the smell of that soup would drive me nearly crazy—it smelled so good!"

The Pogwagger seemed to be in a reverie, transported in her mind to those days of her youth. After a time, she turned and look Helga dead in the eye, "But all of that is gone now—all gone now, vanished forever," she said icily. "The Pogwaggers are scattered to the winds now—everyone scrabbling for some way to live. Our whole way of life is gone—destroyed—everything we had depended on the Waggers. Now we eke out a living as we can, or sit and sadly watch everything we knew fall apart. The young mostly leave and do anything they find to do, or get tempted into—like me and this scheme to steal some snakeskins and take some slaves to sell. But, as you said, that was a plan that should have stopped a bit shorter than it did."

# A Prime Lot of Butter

Helga and the Grizzly fell into silence as the Wrackshee flotilla continued its way downstream under the starry sky. Gradually, the gentle rocking of the boat lulled them to sleep. Neither one stirred from their peaceful sleep until they were jolted awake by the Wrackshee leader loudly giving commands. “Snuck’s Ear just around the next bend! Prepare to dock! Get the varmints ready for sale!”

Blinking in the bright light of morning, Helga was unable to see what was happening on the river because of the gunwales. However, as the Wrackshee flotilla rounded the river’s bend, she could see that they were approaching a rocky wall with a huge chunk of rock sticking out in the unmistakable shape of a gigantic ear! Whisps of smoke curled around the ear, adding to the weird sight.

Helga gazed at the strange ear as the boats approached it. Drawing closer, she could see that, directly beneath the ear, a large cave opened to the river. Soon, the Wrackshee boats turned toward the cave and floated inside! Helga was surprised to find that the interior of the cave was smoky—a pall of smoke drifted slowly across the upper part of the cave, flowing toward the mouth of the cave. There the smoke escaped and snaked upward around the rocky ear outside.

Helga was astonished to see what was obviously a trading post rising along one side of vast cave. Step-like terraces, carved out over eons as the curving flow of the river’s current carved out the cave and cut steadily deeper into the rock, provided a secure, albeit unlikely, foothold for habitation and commerce. The lively activity of the dimly-lit settlement was apparent even from where Helga sat chained to the gunwale.

The Wrackshee boats moved toward shore, and soon Helga felt her boat bump against a landing pier. Instantly, Wrackshees were standing around her and the other captives, unlocking their chains. As Helga stood and stretched her cramped legs, she could see that other boats, canoes, and kayaks were scattered here and there along the bank, many tied up at the many gangways hanging out from merchant shops built to the very edge of the river. Rudely built and dirty, the entire place showed every sign of neglect and decay. The small metal gangways, although crowded with beasts going about their business, appeared so rusted and broken, as to be nearly beyond use.

“Jump and form in line, you lazy varmints, or you’ll feel the bite o’ my lash! Get up, you! Over there—get in line. Get moving!” The tip of the Wrackshee’s whip cracked just beside Helga’s ear as she moved slowly into line. Wrackshees chained one prisoner’s right ankle to the left ankle of the beast behind, then back to the next one’s right ankle, then to the next one’s left, all the way down the line, making movement slow and difficult.

Pushed roughly forward, cracks of the whip biting at their backs, the captives stumbled clumsily off the boat and stepped onto a rocky outcrop that served as the landing pier. Despite a slight cool cave breeze toward the cave entrance, smoke from dozens of lamps and hearths hung closely about the settlement, giving the air a damply burnt taste in Helga’s mouth as she breathed.

Wrackshee guards, standing with throwing lances at the ready, motioned the captives toward the doorway a few steps down from the pier. On the door hung a signboard: Snuck Rasts and Brother, Grog and Butter.

CRACK! “Keep moving, you Slime-Pots! Move!” CRACK! The lash cut into the Grizzly Pogwagger’s shoulder and she reared her head to protest. CRACK-SHMACK! Two more lashes cut her protest short.

The captives stepped through the doorway into a sort of dingy groghouse with a counter and a few grimy tables. “HIZZZZ!” A huge ancient monitor lizard, dozing in front of a hearth, raised its head, and struggling to its feet, hissed at the captives. Its long gray tongue pushed out in weak spurts. Deeply-wrinkled, wizened skin hung in huge folds almost to the floor. “HIZZZZZ! HIZZZZ!” The old dragon opened its mouth in an attempt to show its fearsome array of teeth, but only succeeded in showing it was nearly toothless. “HIZZZZZ!”

“Down, Pearl! Get Back! Lay down, you old wheezer!” a stocky, disheveled Boar commanded from behind the grog counter. “Here, take this and shut your trap!” said the Boar, reaching into a large jar of pickled mice sitting on the counter. He neatly flicked two pickled mice across the room smack into the monitor’s open gob. SNAP-SCHUMPT! The dragon caught the mice and swallowed them in a single gulp. Then, slowly blinking its large deep blue eyes at its master, its hissing subsided as it settled back down by the hearth.

“There ya go, ya worthless critters! Ol’ Pearl won’t never harm ya—though she’s taken off a few legs and swallowed a few wee ones whole in her better days.” Patting the jar of pickled mice, the Boar continued, “Yessir, Pearl loves these little treats here and that’s about all she’s up to these days—now when she was in her prime, ya didn’t want to sit none to too close to her with yer boots off. Why, one time, she just snipped off one old Coyote’s toes who wiggled them a little too much by the fire. Not her fault ya understand—fool Coyote just

tormentin' her like that." The scattered pikers and scalawags swilling grog at the tables guffawed, and seeing this pleasant diversion was at an end, went back to their gambling and talk.

"Now then," the Boar said jocularly, picking flecks of food from his huge yellowed tusks with a long skinning knife, "looks like you've got a bit of butter to sell, eh?" Coming out from behind the counter, he slowly walked past the line of captives, poking each one here and there with the point of his knife to test the firmness of muscle. "Yep, looks like some mighty fine butter—they'll bring a lot on the trallé market at Port Newolf. Just step out back and speak with Snuck and his brother, why they'll fix ya right up and y'll be on yer way."

The Wrackshee guards motioned for Helga and the others to move through a door the Boar had opened at the rear of the groghouse. Stepping through the door, Helga and the others entered a dimly-lit warehouse with a low ceiling. Most of the room was stacked with crates, hogsheads, casks, and bundles of snakeskins. The room had an over-powering stench and Helga wished she could hold her breath. The naturally putrid smell of the Wrackshee guards now was mingled with a stale odor of sweating, unwashed beasts that hung in the air, although no other beasts were apparent beyond Helga her small group of fellow captives. Several long-decomposing barrels of spiced lizard guts leaked their contents into rancid puddles, adding their own gag-inducing stink. And, clinging to it all, the constant, oppressive stale smokiness.

Coming in at the front of the line of captives, Helga noticed that a lone figure dominated this most unpromising scene. Beneath an oil lamp hanging on the wall, stood a lone, muscular Wolf—faintly green eyes glinting out of an immensely hairy face, red cap pulled tight on the head, coiled leather whip and short rapier tied at the belt—the characteristic features of a Norder Wolf slave trader!

"Here ya go, Snuck, a prime lot of butter for ya," the Wrackshee leader said, as the line of captives were herded toward the Wolf.

"Yes, looks like a very good lot, indeed," the Wolf replied.

"Not a good bunch at all!" Helga said fiercely. "It's a bunch that will sit on its haunches and not work a lick, nobody would want this pile of trouble, I assure you!" Helga yelled, straining against her bonds with all her strength.

Ignoring Helga's outburst, the Wrackshee continued, "A high-spirited, strong beast, as you can see. Exactly what is needed at Tilk Duraow." Turning toward Christer, the Wrackshee said, "And this fine young beast has sound muscle and bone and a lively eye—shows real potential."

"Ain't got no sense, no how," Christer said stupidly, giving his most ignorant look to the Wolf. "Don't know a lick about nothin'," Christer

went on, “don’t even know how to tie boot laces—and that’s the truth, fer sure.”

“And his leg only works right when he’s got Wigger’s Salve to rub on his bum leg,” Helga added, pointing to the leg Christer was now rubbing, as if it pained him. “And the last bottle of Wigger’s Salve I ever saw was years ago—No sir, no way he’s fit to cut stones—why he’s so weak, both in leg and brain, not to mention lazy and shiftless, why he’d be a danger to all the rest of your slaves!” Helga complained, giving Christer a look of profound disdain.

CRAAAAKKKK! A Wrackshee guard sent his lash down like a lightning bolt across Helga’s back. She winced but, instead of submitting, Helga threw a frenzied attack against the bonds that held her, dragging the entire line of captives this way and that as she tried to break free. CRAKKK! CRAKKK! The lash feel on her again and again, but with no effect, until at last she stopped. Breathing heavily, Helga yelled, “You’ll never make a slave of me—NEVER—and you’ll never take these other beasts into your hell-hole at Tilk Duraow either so long as I draw breath! You’ll never sleep a sound night’s sleep again so long as I’m alive!”

“Very nice speech, Wood Cow,” Snuck replied. “But, unfortunately, you are now, in fact, a slave and so are your friends. I’ll be staying right here, paying off your Wrackshee hosts, while my brother and his friends escort you to where you will join the other slaves. Then, why, there won’t hardly be time for you to blink and you’ll all be off for the slave works at Tilk Duraow—oh, except for you, that is.” Eyeing Helga slyly, the Norder Wolf continued, “Why, you’ve shown such strength and spirit—why, it was truly impressive the way you pulled things around! Just the kind of power and energy that they look for in Tilk Duraow runners! Yes, you’d be perfect for that!”

At that moment, a large rough timber door swung open at the back of the warehouse. A second Norder Wolf appeared, accompanied by several dangerous-looking, long-tusked Rummer Boars. “Well, Snuck, looks like you’ve got some nice fresh butter there—we’ll be glad to take over now.”

“O.K., you Slimeheads,” Snuck said, turning to the captives. “You just trot on over there by Bro-Butt—he’ll be your host from now on, until you get to Port Newolf.”

There was involuntary, suppressed laughter among the captives at the mention of the second Norder Wolf’s name. Snuck turned and gave the prisoners an evil smile. “Yes, laugh away, Slimeheads. My brother is my Butter Trader, so I call him Bro-Butt. Find that humorous if you want—I won’t deprive you of the last laugh you’ll have for a very long time. What’s going to happen to you next won’t leave you laughing.”

# A Likely Tilk Duraow Runner

Bro-Butt cracked the lash as he and the Rummer Boars drove Helga and the captives roughly through the large heavy door and onto a long stone passage descending into a dank, dimly-lit stairway leading downward through a tunnel in the rock. The stairway was narrow, requiring the beasts to move single-file, and was constructed merely by hewing rough footholds from the stone. Walking on the slippery surface was treacherous in the best of circumstances, but for chained beasts, it was especially difficult. A few of the Rummer Boars carried oil lamps to light the way. The burning oil wicks sputtered in the oppressive dampness of the tunnel, casting barely enough faint light for the beasts to see the steps they were taking. Otherwise, the tunnel was completely dark. Water dripped everywhere in the tunnel like a light rain shower and tiny rivulets ran down the walls—pooling on the steps, or running down the stairs in slow streams. As the beasts descended into what seemed an endless dark abyss, even Helga, brave and stout-hearted beast though she was, felt her heart race in the pitch blackness. The heavy, fearful breathing of the captives, with the constant backdrop of chains dragging across the rock, echoed in the tunnel—as if no other sound existed in the world.

The passage descended in fits and spurts: going down steeply at times, leveling off at times, and climbing somewhat at times. The overall effect was to leave Helga unable to judge if their journey was generally downward or not. Helga was certain, however, of another unsettling observation. As the flickering light played across the wet yellow sandstone walls, Helga could see that the sandstone was flaking away in places. The constant dripping and erosion from small rivulets was slowly undermining its strength. Here and there, the constant erosion created and steadily enlarged holes and seams in the walls and roof of the passage. Walking along, chips and flakes of sandstone dropped with a “Plink” in the puddles, and at places, large rocks lay pell-mell or in piles where entire sections had fallen away. Helga felt certain that someday—how far in the future was anyone’s guess—the roof of the passage would collapse completely. The image of the tunnel collapsing into rubble added to the unsettling anxiety she felt as they continued through the dark, dripping passage.

Fortunately, they were not long in descending the passage. Less

than an hour, Helga judged, after they had begun their journey through the passage, a voice called out, “Hullo, my frippers! What’s the lark?”

In the faint light of the oil lamps, Helga could make out the face of a snub-nosed, flat-browed Wolf floating just ahead in a rowboat.

“Frippers hailing for a Butter Skimmer,” Bro-Butt replied. “Butter for the High One and a spit of grog for you.”

The dangerous-looking Wolf, armed with an immense club, wore an ill-fitting uniform, which, in the darkness, made it look like his head was plopped on top of a shapeless mass. His small, pinched eyes, peering through spectacles, showed red in the lamplight. A leather helmet, perched precariously on his head, tilted so badly over his left ear that it threatened to fall off at any moment. The overall effect, Helga thought, was more ludicrous than sinister. But that calming assessment did not change the fact that she stood in a line of chained slaves, with whip-lashing thugs behind and a well armed Wolf in front.

“Who on earth is that,” said Christer, stifling a laugh.

“It’s no laughing matter,” one of the Pogwaggers replied. “That’s a Club Wolf sentry boat—one of the Norder Wolf patrols that keep unwanted notice away from their tidy little trade in slaves.”

Bro-Butt pulled a small metal flask from his coat pocket and gave it to the Wolf, who took a couple of long draws, wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his uniform, and belched. “BUUURRCHUTUP—BUZZCHUPTT!” Smiling happily, the Wolf put the cork back in the flask and dropped it into his uniform pocket. “How there, frippers! I’ll whistle you up a Skimmer, now there!”

The Wolf gave a low, warbling whistle, which had hardly died away when—WHOOOSH! Just off-shore, pine knot torches were touched with a match and burst into flame. The sudden blaze of brilliant light came from a long, grimy barge gliding in from the lake.

Helga’s eyes involuntarily winced at the sudden blaze of brilliant light, but she soon adjusted and was astonished at the odd-looking boat coming in to tie up. Two immense, rough-looking Wolves, each leaning on a ferry-pole, were guiding what appeared to be a filthy freight wagon made into a boat. Huge, oversized wagon wheels—perhaps 10-feet in diameter—made the boat seem smaller than it was.

Each of the Wolves appeared to be about as thick through the chest as they were broad at the shoulders. Their exceptionally long noses pushed out amidst scraggly, matted, dirty beards that hid virtually every other facial feature. One of the Wolves, with a beard showing the deep reddish-tan of youth, stood near the right front of the skimmer. The other Wolf, poling the barge from the rear, had a greasy beard, iron-gray with age. Dressed in similar dingy blue shirts and

butternut overalls, the Wolves' rough, untanned lizard-skin belts held every kind of knife. Glistening-sharp hatchets hung from shoulder slings.

"'Ow much butter ya got there, good Bro-Butt?" the iron-gray Wolf hailed as the barge landed.

"Five, Stench—and every o' of them muscle n' not a lick o' trouble," Bro-Butt replied. "Well, that is, except for one," he continued, pointing to Helga, "now that Wood Cow there, why, she's born a likely Tilk Duraow runner! Why, the dragons'll run like they've never run before with her as bait. She's got blazes in her and when she lets loose—she'll run like a mad beast!"

"Yee-Gad! A Tilk Duraow runner!" Stench gloated. "What a fine lot o' butter you've brought us this time, Bro-Butt! Yee-Gad! If the Dragon Boss really takes her for a runner, she's worth a fortune!" Smacking his lips, the older Wolf looked Helga up and down with his wild, cunning eyes. "Yee-Gad! A Tilk Duraow runner in our very own skimmer, Reek! Why, think of it!" he laughed, snapping his fingers at the younger Wolf. "We never transported a runner before—it's the cargo of a lifetime!"

"Tam-Yap!" Reek snickered. "We may not have a lot of slaves to sell—like the crew of sea-beasts the Wrackshees just brought into the Butter Dock, but they don't have a runner! I saw the whole crew of 'em and not a one of them that could run with the dragons."

"What sea-beasts?" Helga exploded. "What crew of sea-beasts are you talking about?" Helga, in a fury, struggled against her chains again, and again brought the lash down on her.

"Quiet, Wood Cow!" Bro-Butt warned. "Too many more words out of you and you won't get the chance to be a runner. You'll be sent straight to the Death Cliffs at Tilk Duraow. They go through a dozen stone-cutters a day—minimum."

Helga was not deterred, however. "What sea-beasts?" she demanded again. "What ship's crew has been taken by the Wrackshees?"

"Why that would be the *Daring Dream,*" Reek snarled. "A fine crew of strong, hardy beasts from the Far Aways. They'll do fine as stone-cutters on the Death Cliffs—why the crew's big enough to give probably a couple week's supply—Har-Yat-Har!" he chuckled with a cruel smile.

Several Rummer Boars set about pushing the captives to board the skimmer. The Rummers loaded the captives and tied them securely to poles that circled the skimmer's deck. Once the captives were securely tied, the Rummer guards slumped down on the deck to rest and take a few spits of grog, while the Wolves poled the barge out onto the Ocean of Dreams. In a few hours, the skimmer would unload the

slaves at the Butter Dock beneath Port Newolf. From there, the captives would join the other slaves awaiting sale. Soon after the slaves reached the Butter Dock, a Rummer Boar fleet was expected to arrive at Port Newolf, laden with trallés looted from the rich cargo ships plying the Great Sea.

Trallés, huge high-domed tortoises, were highly-prized among the wealthy class as sporting mounts. Every rich trader and merchant had a stable full of the finest trallés that could be bought. All manner of mounted sports relied on trallés and no wealthy beast who yearned to be noticed in highest society could do without a first-class trallé stable. The bazaar in Port Newolf anxiously awaited the regular visits of the Rummer fleets. A pack of dubious merchants made vast fortunes trading in the shadows where trallés bought slaves to cut stone for the High One's great project of building *Maev Astuté*. In the black trade of trallés and slaves where no one could be trusted, the High One's rule was that no one got paid until all were paid. Rummer Boars were the sureties in this system—shepherding the flow of trallés and slaves through the dealers, and the gold into every waiting dark pocket along the way. When asked once about the line of work he was in, the greatest Rummer Boar of them all, Sabre Tusk d'Newolf, is reported to have replied, "Accounting—just say we're accountants, keeping all the pluses and minuses correct and making sure everyone gets paid—including us! HAR-HAR-HAR!"

Bro-Butt watched the loading work with a satisfied look. His pockets would soon be full of gold. Slaves delivered to the Butter Dock and the arrival of the Rummer fleet, would lead to various transactions in Port Newolf, all monitored in the efficient, thugging manner of the Rummers. When all was complete, Bro-Butt's Rummers made their way back to Snuck's Ear with payment for him and his brother. Ah, the delightful world of successful commerce! Smiling happily, Bro-Butt watched until the skimmer and its cargo had faded into the darkness of the Ocean of Dreams.

Turning away from the Club Wolf drawing on his flask of grog, Bro-Butt picked up his oil lamp, and laughing gleefully at his success, headed into the passage leading back to Snuck's Ear. "YAH-HAR-HAR—YAH-HAR-HAR-HAR!" In the stillness of the great cave, the rough laughter echoed back down the passage and across the Ocean of Dreams for several minutes. How much more the echo, when, sometime later, the passage collapsed upon him, an entire section of rock sliding forever forward, crushing everything in its way—forever sealing both his fate and the slaving passage from Snuck's Ear to the Ocean of Dreams.

# Cargo for the Butter Dock

There was a low rumble, the water around the skimmer began to jiggle frantically, and the barge began vibrating as if some giant unseen hand were shaking it. POP! CRACK! CRASH! KAAR-SPLOOOSH! Shaking violently, the skimmer tossed and rose up on waves that threatened to capsize the boat. A deafening noise reverberated in the closed confines of the cave—echoing and echoing again as the sound raced down unseen chambers and bounced back again and again.

Aboard the skimmer, now some distance out on the Ocean of Dreams, Helga saw the flickering light of the oil lamps on the Club Wolf sentry boat disappear, as the entire rock face looming over the passage through which she had so recently passed, cracked and broke free. Visible for an instant in the flickering lamplight playing across the rocky chamber walls, Helga watched in shocked fascination as the rock slab toppled slowly outward, as if the mountain above was slowly turning its head to look at her. Then, a split second later, the rock slab fell free and a massive shower of debris completely buried anything familiar about the site. The thunderous sound of the collapsing rock made Helga think her head would explode from the shock wave. Huge waves, instantly splashing outward from the rock slabs slamming into the water, swamped the barge, soaking every beast on deck in the frigid water. In tandem with the soaking waves, a vast cloud of dust spread out over the Ocean of Dreams, shrouding the skimmer in a hideous, choking haze.

Simultaneously, a choking cloud in the dust spread outward over the lake. Coughing and wheezing, knee deep in cold water, all the beasts on the half-submerged barge howled with dismay at the drastically altered situation in which they found themselves. To the good, the swamped, but sturdy skimmer was still afloat. And except for being soaked in freezing water, none of the beasts aboard was injured. On the bad side of things, it was unclear if the skimmer was of any further use and they were now in absolute darkness, the huge wave having drowned the lamps and the choking dust adding a feeling of oppressive dark.

“LANDROLLERS, REEK! GO TO HIGHUP MODE!” Stench called out from the darkness. We’ll raise up the skimmer and drain ’er out! I

know from poling that the water is shallow around here—not more than a maybe six or seven feet deep. That's shallow enough to drain 'er out!"

"Zero wrong, Stench!" Reek laughed, "I'd been thinking that your old brain was all made of dung! But you've got a good idea, this time." Helga could hear Reek sloshing across the deck toward the center of the skimmer. Soon, amidst the coughing and sneezing caused by the dust, Helga heard the grinding-clanking of a set of gears going to work. Little by little, she noticed the barge seemed to be lifting up. Slowly, inch by inch, with every turn of some unseen crank Reek was turning, the skimmer rose higher and higher.

"The water level is falling! What on earth is he doing?" Helga said to Christer excitedly. "Is that crank he's operating?"

"I don't know what he's doing," Christer responded. "But somehow, he's raising up the boat and the water is flowing out!"

"Landrollers, Slime-Face." Stench snarled out of the darkness nearby. "You don't think Reek and I are gonna walk when the skimmer hits land, do you? We've got super-sized wagon wheels that can be cranked up and down—long as we've got good strong slaves to pull us, no place we can't go!" Stench paused, then laughed harshly. "Har-Yet-Yet-Har! In highup mode with the wheels extended all the way, we can sit 20 feet off the ground if we want! Har-Yet-Yet-Har! And sure comes in handy for draining 'er out, too! Har-Yet-Yet-Har!"

The skimmer lifted higher and higher. Although she could not see what was happening in the pitch darkness, she could hear Reek cranking furiously, some gears screeching, and timbers creaking as the skimmer rose. As the barge rose, Helga felt the water pouring off the flooded deck. Soon she was sitting, the water drained away, shivering in her soaked garments.

"Now what?" Christer muttered, noticing several dim yellow haloes of light coming towards them. Helga's eyes were scratchy as she peered through the fine dust hanging in the air, trying to see who or what was approaching. The lanterns of several Club Wolf sentry boats illuminated the skimmer as they converged at the troubled boat.

"Hallo, frippers," a voice hailed, as one of the sentry boats pulled alongside. "Heard some fierce commotion and came to investigate. Tradin' or trippin' today? Call out your game."

"We've got cargo for the Butter Dock," Stench called out, returning the hail. "Fresh butter for Tilk Duraow. We're strong in our timbers and sound in our crew, but our wicks and lamps are drowned. Can't see a blasted thing in this infernal haze. We'd be mighty pleasant if you'd guide us to the Butter Dock."

"Chew the foot, frippers! Lights comin' over!" Several lanterns were lit and handed to Reek, who reached over the side to bring them

aboard.

Reek hung the lanterns and the sentry boats pulled away from the skimmer. “Follow us,” one of the Club Wolf sentries called out. “We’ll see you into the Butter Dock in no time.” Moving across the lake, gradually the dust began to settle somewhat and it became easier to breathe. Little by little, Helga could see more of her surroundings in the lantern light.

Weird shadows flickered across the haze-shrouded lake. As the skimmer followed the sentry boats, a fantastic menagerie of ghostly shapes appeared amidst the shadows, then faded away again. One after another, fantastic shapes flickered, ghostlike, in the haze for a few moments, and then, were replaced by others. It was as if the skimmer were threading its way through a labyrinth of grotesque alien worlds—or as if it sailed through an entire country of ruined villages, filled with stark blasted walls and huge broken buildings fallen into hideous shapes. What surely was a place of monstrosities and terror in good light became a sinister, haunting realm of nightmares in the hazy flicker of lantern light.

“This place gives me the creeps,” Helga said somewhat irritably to Christer, who was chuckling loudly next to her. “How can you laugh in a place like this?” she demanded, as his laughter increased in tempo.

“HA-HA-HA-HO-HO-HO!” Christer guffawed. “HA-HA-HA—this is the funniest thing I’ve seen in a long time—HO-HO-HO! I haven’t thought about any of this stuff in years! HA-HA-HA! This is just too funny!” Christer was laughing so hard that his large bulk shook wildly.

“What on earth has gotten into you?” Helga asked irritably. “What are you laughing at?”

“Please, Helga,” Christer blubbered through his roaring laughter, “please, it’s just seeing that idiot Sam tickling Miss Frightful—HA-HA-HA!—at least that’s what we called her—she was our teacher when—HO-HO-HO-HA-HA-HA—when we were wee beasts!”

“But where are they?” Helga asked in exasperation. “I can’t see anything!”

“Some of the rocks look just like Sam and Miss Frightful—looks like Sam is tickling her! HA-HA-HA! I haven’t thought about that in years, but the rocks remind me of it. HO-HO-HO! Oh this is too much—and over there’s that hilarious dream I once had where I was riding a bat!”

“That’s why they call it the Ocean of Dreams,” Reek commented. “The weird shapes here grab your mind and make you see things—if you can dream it, you can see a rock formation that resembles it! Hard to believe, but true. Every dream or nightmare you’ve ever had might come back to you here—they kind of reach out and just grab your

mind. It's really eerie at first, but the more trips you make through here, you get used to it."

Christer gradually calmed down and his laughter settled into irregular, low guffaws as some new image leaped to mind amidst the rocks. Helga, however, was startled by what she saw in the formations. It seemed to her that she and her mother, Helbara, were back on that ill-fated river, years before, with Wrackshees closing in. There was her mother going off to meet the Wrackshees—protecting Helga who was hidden in a hollow tree—how could it be that these rocks were so realistic? It was as if she were there exactly as it was.

"HA-HA-HA!" Christer's laughter snapped Helga back to the present. "What is the matter with you!" she yelled. "How can you laugh at time like this?"

"Why not," Christer replied with a grin. "Why spend the last days of my life weeping and wailing, rather than laughing and singing? We are bound off to be worked to death—why not laugh in the happy memories of the old days that come to mind? And…," he paused and looked at Helga, "isn't it good for me to laugh and rejoice now, being in the company of the prettiest Wood Cow I ever laid eyes on?"

Helga blushed at this unexpected turn of the conversation. "You are an absolute loonie, Christer! A nut-case!" Helga laughed, recovering herself. "Now what good does that comment do you? I don't have the slightest interest in returning the compliment."

"Oh, a saucy and cheeky sort, to boot!" Christer said, smiling.

"Not at all," Helga replied, "I just don't compliment beasts acting like complete idiots."

"Then we are a pair," Christer chuckled, "because it's clear you don't have a particle of good sense."

"Well, I never heard the equal to that!" Helga laughed, despite herself.

"Now don't get me wrong," Christer said with another chuckle, "I don't claim to be your equal—why the world would be a fearsome place if there were two of us like you!"

"If you want to see me being fearsome," Helga growled with a smile, "you just keep up your being a silly humbug—when we are in desperate trouble and getting worse by the minute—look over there!" She pointed through the hazy light. A dock was coming into sight in the half-light.

The quay appeared to be deserted, but as the skimmer approached, a cry from a sentinel—"Ranks and swords! Troops forward!"—sounded ominous. Although a glimmer of daylight—could it actually be daylight, Helga wondered?—seemed to filter down from some unseen opening to the outside, it was difficult to distinguish the entire outline of the quay and its surroundings, due to the dim light and the

almost malignant air that caused her eyes to water.

Helga struggled not to gag as her lungs filled with pestiferous odors. To breathe the vapors swirling around the skimmer as it came into dock seemed to carry feelings of melancholy and loneliness deep inside a beast. Through the swirling vapor, the sounds of heavily-booted running feet and further charges and commands seemed sad and forsaken. Christer noticed the effect also and immediately his jesting ceased.

A drawbridge clanged down to the skimmer and a running troop of heavily-armed Skull Buzzards rushed up the drawbridge and took up stations in two columns lining the drawbridge, razor-sharp swords drawn and at the ready.

# Join the Crew of the Daring Dream

"Stand up and get moving!" Stench commanded roughly, pushing Helga and the other captives toward the quay.

A stoutly-built, but flabby Wolf stepped out of the shadows, taking his place at the end of the dock, where the rows of Skull Buzzards ended. The Wolf's florid face shone with oily perspiration as he leaned on his thin cane. Tapping his hightop boot on the dock, he waited impatiently for the captives to unload.

"Hallo, there, now! Step it up! Pipe the Butter, Fetor!" the Wolf called angrily. "The Butter Dock is packed jowl to elbow and most of them are near moldy and rotten! We've been a-waitin' days for this load! We gotta get moving!"

A second Wolf, one-eyed, completely bald on top of his head, and so short and stubby that he hardly reached the waist of the other, stepped forward. Despite his pint-size, Helga could see that he had a king-size attitude as he walked down the line of Skull Buzzards. An evil smirk played across his crooked mouth as he licked drool from his lips and spat it on the polished boots of the Skull Buzzard Commander as he passed by. Reaching the line of captives, he raised a flute to his lips and began playing a marching tune. As the group of captives followed the piper between the Skull Buzzards, the Buzzards swatted each captive on the backside with the flat of their swords, keeping time with the music.

For their part, Stench and Reek smiled at the successful unloading of yet another cargo of butter for the High One. "Ah, 'tis such a shame about Bro-Butt, ain't it Reek?" Stench said with feigned sorrow.

"Aye and Alas, Stench—a mighty terrible pity, 'tis, and that's the truth. Why, no more butter slidin' through that tunnel ever again, I'd reckon. Looks like we're outta business on that way a doin' things. Yep, 'tis a most terrible, awful shame. Boo-Hoo and Hoo-Boo." Reek pulled an exaggerated face and let out a small sniff as if he were crying."

"Now don't you go bawlin' like some little tyke, Reek," Stench chuckled. "Why, now that we're done sobbin' over Bro-Butt, and we've got all this gold in our pockets, I think we ought to just step on upstairs into Port Newolf and look around for some new pickin's. I'm thinkin' we might want to buy up some fine trallés and run a caravan

out into the Norder Wolf Estates. I hear those wealthy Norders will pay outrageously for a top trallé—one good run with trallés, and we could be sittin' pretty for a long time."

Reek's head bobbed in agreement and the two set about securing their skimmer to the quay. "Tie 'er up tight there, Reek. We'll go up to the Port and buy us a few slaves and a load of trallés, then come down here and get the skimmer. With the Landrollers, we'll ride right along in style while the slaves pull us along and carry the trallés. Yes, sir, it will be a fine new business for us."

Having secured the skimmer, Reek and Stench walked up a long ramp running upward to the left of the quay. In a few minutes, they walked out into the bright sunlight of Port Newolf. Stopping briefly at the Skull Buzzard checkpoint, they then stepped out into the thriving port to seek their new line of work.

Helga and the other captives, however, were conducted down a long, broad train of stone steps leading away from the quay in the opposite direction, Fetor in front, piping away, and lines of Skull Buzzards to each side, swatting away with their swords. Despite the sting of the swords slapping her on the rear, Helga had to admit that the melody of the flute, while played poorly, was at least helped musically by the strong backbeat of the sword swats.

In just a few steps, the troop descended into a dingy, stinking chamber. Two massive iron doors, at least seven inches thick, stood open to admit them, with Skull Buzzard guards to each side. Helga gasped at what she saw: dozens of beasts standing nearly knee deep in water, each chained to rusty iron rings attached to the ceiling! Sea-beasts crowded together, packed on top of one another, pressed into the dismal, flooded, suffocating stench of unwashed bodies and molding clothes—Helga nearly screamed at the sight! Not a single breath of fresh air moved in the dreary chamber. Only beasts with hearts of steel could possibly endure in such a place.

"Welcome to the Butter Dock, Slime-bags," Fetor announced. "Step right in and join the crew of the *Daring Dream*—they've been awaiting your arrival." Fetor laughed, then continued, "But don't get too comfortable because you won't be here long. As soon as we get these lazy scum ready to go, we'll be heading for Tilk Duraow."

"You know of Tilk Duraow, I suppose?" Fetor asked with sly sarcasm. "Perhaps its considerable fame has reached your ears? Ah, yes, that great, magnificent, wide open, yawning abyss—that miraculous, glorious bottomless pit, from which come the precious stones to build *Maev Astuté*! How could your heart not burn to cut those stones?" A malignant smile played across Fetor's odd crooked mouth, dripping with a constant flow of drool.

"Just imagine with me the immense iron buckets forever passing up

and down on their rattling, clanking chains! The creaking and groaning of gears and pulleys! Ah, the music of it! And think of the armies of beasts like yourselves—working on those vertical walls of stone, nearly a thousand feet from base to top—reduced to the appearance of ants crawling upon the massive walls. Some crawl across those wondrous walls on spider-web like ropes; others on ladders lashed together many dozens of feet in length, warped by the distance—Oh! What a joy! And especially for those lucky beasties clinging to the blasting baskets! Hear them hammering, 'Tap-Tap-Tap,' as they drive an iron bolt into the solid rock to make a cavity for blasting powder! Then, who sets the powder and lights it? Why the beastie on the basket!!! Quickly now, light it, and, Heave Ho, get them out of the way! Maybe! HA-HA-HA-HO!"

Fetor paused, slowly wiping drool off his chin, brow furrowed, as if remembering something. "Ah, yes, I almost forgot—everyone gets to enjoy the blessings of Tilk Duraow. The female Wood Cow has been chosen to be a Tilk Duraow runner—so she won't be going with you." The Wolf turned to the Skull Buzzards and said, "You two take the Wood Cow to Norder Crossings—but watch her closely, I can see she's a pack of trouble if you take your eyes off her—Heh-Heh-Heh—which is exactly why she'll make a good runner."

"I am not willing to allow her to go!" Christer exploded. "I demand to go in her place!"

"Willing, you say?" Fetor said, bemused. "The question is whether I am willing, my dear fellow, and, sad to say for your hopes, I am not willing to accept your offer of service."

"You are nothing but a bald, musically untalented tyrant," Christer remonstrated.

"It will be wiser not to criticize my music," Fetor warned with a sarcastic tone. "Beasts with their feet in the chains I own do not have a very good record of correcting my playing—or in opposing me in any other way. I suggest you just settle down and enjoy the walk to Tilk Duraow."

"And if I should refuse that kind offer?" Christer asked.

"In that case, I'm afraid I might have to prevail on your young female friend here to help me make you more reasonable," the Wolf replied.

The icy note of warning in Fetor's response was not lost on Christer. Glancing helplessly at Helga, he said, "Believe me, Fetor, I will do as you say, but only that I may one day hope to see you splattered across the rocks of your precious Tilk Duraow. Mark my words."

# A Dragonwacker's Work

Rain at Norder Crossings was never normal. At Norder Crossings it rains like a dam has broken and the lake dumps on the unfortunate beasts below. But this time the rains were especially bad. Rivers were so swollen that caravans could not cross. Bridges were destroyed. Roads washed away. The very important monitor train to the Hedgelands was so long delayed that many merchants and traders were facing ruin. When at last the sun shone after weeks of rain, every merchant in town was in the market square at dawn, pushing and haggling for all he was worth. Everyone was making up for lost time; each moment precious.

Ankle-deep water still filled the streets in some places. Colonel Snart, Monopole of the caravan, slogged along, making final checks of the monitors being loaded.

"That knot won't get any tighter if you pull on it another week," he fumed as a weary Wolf fumbled to secure the ropes holding packs in place on a monitor's back. "Give it to me! I'll pull it tight—you get over there and help Raskin load those barrels on the wagon. You pull your weight you bumbling idiot, or you'll be carrying packs just like the monitors." The tired, cold Wolf bowed to the Monopole and backed away with head bowed.

"We pull out in an hour!" Colonel Snart yelled after the Wolf, loudly enough to be heard all along the line of beasts working feverishly to load the monitor train. "Any more delays and we'll miss the last of the Trading Days—if that happens, more than a few of you will be breaking rock at Tilk Duraow!"

The impact of the threat was immediate. All along the line beasts increased the speed of their frantic efforts to ready the monitor train for departure. No beast wanted to be sentenced to the slave-works at the Granite Hulks of Tilk Duraow. There, slaves broke and cut rock that was used to build the great castle of *Maev Astuté*. It was dangerous, often deadly, work. A troublesome beast could easily find himself swinging in a rickety basket at a dizzying height above the ground sawing huge pieces of granite loose. Without warning, chunks could break away and knock the unfortunate beast to the rocks far below. It was an unpleasant business.

*Slurrp! Slosht!* "Ahhhh, that's better." Coming from behind him, the

sound caught the Monopole's attention. A young Wolf sat on the open tailgate of a wagon pouring water out of his boots and wringing water out of his soaked trouser legs. Seemingly unaware that anything was amiss in what he was doing, the good-humored Wolf hummed a song as he tried to dry himself.

*Oh the rains are wet and me boots overflow—*
*A-me-a-my-hum-me-de-me*
*Me field's awash and I'm growin' gills—*
*Alas, me potatoes are drownin'*
*A-me-a-my-hum-de-me-de-me—*

KA-CHUNK! Colonel Snart whacked the Wolf across the head with the blunt end of his pike.

"Get on with it!" the Monopole screamed at the poor, confused Wolf. "Load the packs, you empty-brained sluggard!"

"Now, I'll be beggin' your pardon, lord," the Wolf replied. "I'm not bound to your cargo, nor likin' the thanks you gave me for my business. I'm a farmer, not your personal puncher-beast. I bought my goods from Mr. Peets, as I assume you'd be glad I did as he pays your wages. So, I'll be pleased if you'd leave off with beatin' on me head!"

"Get your sluggard bottom off of my wagons, if you're not a caravan beast," Colonel Snart responded coldly. "That will be my thanks for your business—you'd best be thanking your own good luck that I did not split your skull. Mr. Peets' affairs are Mr. Peets' affairs—and as there's no other place to buy what you need, I'm sure you'll be keeping your complaints to yourself. Now, move your sluggard bottom off of my wagon."

Despite the angry words and ill-treatment, the good-natured Wolf smiled as he pulled on his boots. Shouldering his pack, the Wolf farmer picked up his walking staff and moved away from the monitor train. Pausing just before he turned a corner and went out of sight, he called back, "At the end, you know, we all end up at Tilk Duraow. See you there." Then, he was gone.

The Wolf's curious comment left puzzled looks on the faces of every beast that heard it, except for Colonel Snart. The color drained from the Monopole's face and he leaned on his pike, breathing heavily. Sudden dizziness had come over him and he struggled to stay upright, gasping for breath. Looking strangely pale and shaken he wobbled off, muttering. "Wheesh...gashp...wheesh...not Tilk Duraow for me...you're a lying beast...wheesh..."

Colonel Snart staggered a few steps beside the caravan before stumbling heavily against a huge monitor being loaded by one of the Dragonwackers. Grabbing frantically to keep from falling, the

Monopole caught hold of the heavy rope lashings, stopping his fall. The Wolf had hardly touched the monitor's pack-harness when the beast lunged violently to the side, toward the Colonel, hissing ferociously and snapping its massive jaws.

"AYYYYAWWWWH!" Colonel Snart yelled in startled surprise as the lizard's jaws—filled with two-inch, razor-sharp teeth—snapped shut, catching the edge of the Colonel's coat-sleeve tightly within them. With a turn of his powerful head, the monitor jerked the Monopole toward it, making the next snap of the jaws certain to bloody Colonel Snart himself. The monitor's horrid-smelling breath—said to be the worst odor anywhere—shot out in huge putrid gusts. Pulled off balance by the monitor's jerk, Colonel Snart's face dropped directly into the stream of loathsome breath. Gagging at the vile stench, the Monopole's stomach churned and he felt as if he would pass out—the usual next step for a beast falling prey to a monitor attack.

The Dragonwacker reacted instantly to the danger. Leaping on top of the monitor's wide head, he began jumping up and down, pounding the lizard on the head with his heavy boots. "Torff ta Mit! Salamy! Torff ta Mit!" the Dragonwacker yelled, giving commands to the monitor.

Slowly the giant lizard calmed down and, after a few more jumps on its head, the fearsome creature released its bite on the Monopole's coat. Slick, gooey-looking drool glistened in heavy globs on the Colonel's clothing where the monitor's bite had ripped away much of the arm of his coat.

"Den't ya tetch the druul," the Dragonwacker warned. "It's wers'na bite of th'a dragen hir'silf! Here ser, drep'it ceat in th'a buckit. Thi'n I'll be burn'it fer ya."

The Colonel heeded the warning, carefully removing his coat and handing it over to be burned. Every beast he had ever known that had been bitten by a monitor had died. Monitor bites were not poisonous, but as their stinking breath suggested, their filthy mouths were filled with all manner of loathsome bacteria. A "fortunate" beast that survived a monitor bite and escaped soon saw his fur falling out and the skin rolling up all around the wound. The deep slashing bite wounds always became badly infected. It was rare for a beast with a monitor bite to survive more than a day or two.

"Luuk here, Mastir, ya git car'liss like that again—rip-snap-gulp, and ya're a mimery. Ya's b'in ri'und ta dragins ling eni'ugh ta kniw ta dangir. What's git inta ya's skull? Ta dragin's billy din't hild ta niceties i' rank. Ya's just pewirful lucky that ta meni'ters have just had tar's li'ading mi'al—ya kniw that mak's thim sli'ipy and sluggish fir a few hours. But din't be fuuled—ya disturb tar' napping, like ya did, and

th'a doin't like it ine bit. Ya act like a thickwit again and ya wen't bi sa lucky—mark my werds!"

No one could explain why the Wolf farmer's comment had so affected the normally powerful and confident Monopole, although it was the subject of many whispered conversations as the caravan beasts worked.

Fifty-four monitors yoked in teams of two made up the caravan, connected one-after-another in a train. Carefully loaded to carry the maximum burden, each monitor had two packs of equal weight, and as similar in bulk as possible. The packs were lashed securely to sturdy wooden frames placed across the backs of each monitor team to further balance the load.

The monitors themselves took neither food nor water during the journey. Immediately before being yoked and loaded, the monitors were fed an immense meal. Huge hunks of shark were thrown into the monitor pens and a greedy frenzy took place as the monitors gorged themselves. The gruesome spectacle served the purpose of temporarily making the vicious creatures docile and sluggish.

As the feeding frenzy subsided, Dragonwackers lead the sleepy beasts to the caravan loading area and yoked up the teams. Then loading proceeded rapidly while the sluggish beasts dozed. Once the monitors' stupor wore off, the caravan had to depart immediately. Once awake, the Dragons began looking for their next meal—and the ready scent of the Tilk Duraow runner at the head of the caravan was the means of getting the caravan moving.

# A Rebel, an Untamed One

"She's a likely looking runner," the Monopole commented, "I'll raise you ten."

"Don't let the strong looks of her legs turn your brain upside down," Mudpot replied. "She's a Wood Cow—strong as you like, and looks to be fast, that's for sure—but a rebel to the bone. She'll be fighting the rope every step of the way. We'll start with her, but mark my words—we'll be replacing her before we make the Steep Crossing, and not because the Dragon's get her either! This one's a fighter like we've not seen in a long time. Them type's get their freedom. You keep raising your bet and all you're doing is giving me your money." The Dragon Boss laughed. "So, come on, Colonel—raise me as you please!"

Colonel Snart considered the coin he was about to throw on the ground in front of Mudpot. As was their custom in the last few minutes before a Dragon Train left Norder Crossings on its passage to the Hedgelands, the Monopole and the Dragon Boss made bets about the likely fate of the various Tilk Duraow runners. Sometimes several runners were needed to complete the caravan passage to the Hedgelands—but now their attention was focused on the Wood Cow that Mudpot had selected to be the lead-off runner.

Mudpot, a jet black Weasel, was Boss of the Dragonwackers and a good judge of the runners condemned to lead the Dragon Trains. He had seen many a runner win freedom in the so-called 'Feast or Freedom' run—and many more end up as chow for the monitors. The Monopole, on the other hand, had never ridden a single mile with the Dragonwackers. The dirty, dangerous business of 'running the Dragons' repulsed him, although he liked the profits of the 'tidy little trade' as he called it.

"She can run like the wind," the Monopole declared, throwing a coin on the cobblestone street before Mudpot. "A successful run of the Dragons requires speed, not obedience," he continued. "It is your job to make sure she cannot escape. We are wagering on her speed and endurance, not your watchfulness and brains—if we were wagering on your care and intelligence, I would not be betting so much," Colonel Snart laughed. "So long as you have her in a strong harness, so that she cannot break away, her only safety from the monitors is speed and

endurance. She will be running for her life, not plotting an escape."

So saying, he tossed another coin on the ground, casting a sarcastic grin in the direction of the beast being wrestled into a harness at the front of the monitor train. A crew of three burly Dragonwackers struggled to subdue and harness the thin and wiry Wood Cow. Groping for the harness fastenings, one of the Dragonwackers slipped on the muddy cobblestones and went down in a murky puddle. "FUUL! Cursi ya, Trash Cow!" the Dragonwacker yelled as he picked himself up, muddy water dripping from his leggings.

"Never mind the cursing," Mudpot said, "it's not words, but muscle that wins the day in this business." Stepping forward, he added his force to the job of containing the wildly resisting beast. Taking a small key from his pocket, he locked the clasp that secured the chain harness.

"She's powerful strong, that's for sure," Mudpot observed, returning to where Colonel Snart waited. "There's no question about her endurance—but that gold-red sparkle in her eyes bears watching. She's a rebel, an untamed one. She's got more than speed. She's got a will to break free—that's what makes her a good runner. But it also puts the will of a demon in our midst. If she does not slip her harness or destroy us, this will be the fastest run of the dragons ever."

"Speed is a risk," the Monopole agreed, "but that cannot be helped. These infernal rains have put the caravan weeks behind. We will all be ruined—I will be ruined—if the monitor train does not make a fast crossing to the Hedgelands. The traders are like a pack of hounds at my back. If the caravan does not make the passage before the trallé traders have left, the Norder Crossings merchants will replace me as Monopole. Speed is a risk—but slowness is a bigger risk."

Colonel Snart tossed a handful of coins at Mudpot's feet. "There—that's my wager on this runner, Mudpot," he said. "My future as Monopole rides on the success of this run of the dragons. If I must bet my future and my fortune on the spirit of a demon, so be it."

Mudpot bowed before the Monopole and scooped up the coins.

The key to a successful run of the dragons to the Hedgelands was speed. Once the monitor caravan was loaded and the monitors were fully awake again, the monitor train had to make the passage between Norder Crossings and the Hedgelands before the monitors grew ravenously hungry again. A skilled Dragon Boss knew precisely how to make the run to the Hedgelands with great speed. Mudpot was the best of them all. Stuff the monitors with shark, load while they dozed, then as they began to stir, set a swift—and tasty-smelling—runner at the front of the caravan. For the runners it was a chance to escape the fate of the slave works at Tilk Duraow. As the runner ran for life and freedom, the monitors raced after the scent of their next meal. The

faster the runner, the faster the caravan traveled. If the runner was fast and strong enough to endure the grueling race, he or she might stay just ahead of the monitors all the way to the slave works and win freedom. Runners that faltered or stumbled became an impromptu snack for the monitors. A Dragon Boss wanted the fastest, strongest runner possible. A failed runner meant delay and other problems as the lead monitors snacked, and then turned sluggishly sleepy—while the rest grew dangerously restive. The delay could be even longer if replacement runners turned to “shakes and gibbers”—quivering piles of terrorized flesh unable to stand, let alone run. When “shakes and gibbers” struck it could hold up a Dragon Train for days while new runners were brought from Norder Crossings.

# Godgie Stomp

As the monitor train departed, Helga, the Tilk Duraow runner in the lead, moved out fast, staying a healthy 2-3 feet ahead of the lead monitors. Snorting, hissing, long forked tongues flicking rapidly, claws clicking over the stones; the monitors rushed madly along at Helga's heels. Despite their stubby legs, the monitors scuttled after her with surprising speed. Many an unfortunate beast had learned—too late—that monitors had lightning speed.

The monitor train moved fast over the well-constructed caravan road, stopping for nothing. Mudpot, hunched forward in the Dragon Master's seat above and behind the lead monitors, cracked a long whip furiously, urging them to the greatest possible speed. The reckless fury of the Dragon Master sent the monitor train weaving and lurching forward like an untamed wind.

"TEEA-CHT! YAHT! YAHT! TEEA-CHT! FLY YA SLITHER-BOBS! FLY! YAHT! YAHT" The long lash curled again and again, whistling through the air above the monitors before cracking loudly—just nicking the tail of each monitor on alternate lashes. The monitor train flew wildly down the road, rattling and clattering, careening around corners and sweeping through villages and towns—scattering beasts in the road to the right and left as they dived to safety.

The noise of an approaching monitor train emptied the streets of villages long before the monitors actually ran through. Mothers pulled their wee beasts away from the windows and slammed the shutters tight. Mudpot's constant cries of "TEEA-CHT! YAHT! YAHT! TEEA-CHT!" mingling with the fearsome hissing and blowing of the monitors at the runner's heels could give wee ones nightmares for many a day. And no beast wanted to be bitten by a monitor or, worse, lunch for the monstrous lizards. "PASS AWAY YAS'T FLEA-PICKERS! YAS'T BE OUTTA THE WAY OR YA'LL BE DRAGON FOOD! TEEA-CHT! YAHT! YAHT!"

Yet, as the monitors raced past, creating a terrifying spectacle with their hissing and Mudpot's profane yells filling the air, even the mothers who frantically shielded their children peeked through cracks in the shutters. Frightened though they were, there was a fascinating attraction in the terrifying spectacle passing by.

The only thing a runner was supposed to do was run for life itself—

and Helga ran as she had never run before. Mile after mile she sped along as if in an unbroken series of all-out sprints. Gasping, flushed, pumping the air with her arms—swilling a little saliva around in her dry mouth as if it were water—the hot breath of the monitors just at her rear. She stumbled at times, but never broke stride. It was twenty-three miles to the Hedgelands and only a wild-beast's dash could save her.

At intervals along the caravan route, specially built water towers spewed wide streams of water across the road for twenty yards. Passing under these 'water spits' cooled off the monitors and the runner and let them get a drink without stopping. As the caravan plunged straight through the falling water, monitors flicked their tongues, pulling in water, and Helga tilted her head back to catch water in her mouth as she ran—and the dragon train splashed on without breaking pace.

Immediately after the second water spit, the caravan route cut through a range of steep hills. Gasping and blowing, arms pumping furiously, straining at her harness, Helga labored up the steep ascents and descents, desperately working to keep up the pace. A creeping fear grew within her that even the fearsome terror of the dragons hissing just behind her could not keep her going much longer. She knew that one of two things could happen. She could slow her pace and rest. That was suicide. She could keep running. That might be only postponing the inevitable.

"Please Ancient Ones"—the ragged words came out in gasps, "Help me—I must not stop. Help me run and run and run…" In Helga's fear-laced imagination, the hissing of the monitors always seemed to draw nearer, nearer, nearer...Nearly delirious with pain and fatigue, she panted the same words with each breath: "run, run, run, run..."

At last the caravan route left the steep, deeply cut land behind and the road broke out onto the Godgie Stomp Flats—a broad rocky plain, with scrubby vegetation, bordered by high mountains. Unlike the deep canyons and ravines that had just been passed, the broad slightly rolling plain was mostly level. In the distance, off to the left, a curious cloud of dust was rising from just beyond a slight rise in the land, sufficient to hide its source. It was moving fast, like a fire spreading rapidly toward the caravan route. Despite the urgency of her frantic flight, the distant rising dust cloud had an uneasy fascination. There could be no doubt that the dust cloud was moving rapidly toward the dragon train. There also could be no doubt that something remarkable —stupendous—must be causing it. Whatever it was, Helga could easily see that the path of the dragon train would intersect the course of the dust cloud in a matter of minutes.

The caravan could not easily alter its motion, despite Helga's

growing apprehension. And, of course, a halt would be certain death for her. Frantic terror kept her plunging forward. Gradually a curious clacking rumble joined the sound of her ragged, gasping breath, the pounding of her feet on the road, and the clattering, hissing caravan trailing behind her. Casting brief fascinated glances toward the dust cloud as she ran, an astonishing sight gradually unfolded before Helga's eyes.

Mudpot had also heard the eerie sound and seen the rising dust long before the source came into view. He knew immediately what it was. "Godgie Stomp!" he cursed silently to himself. "Godgies running! Stomp coming!" As a slight tremble ran across his hardened face, a huge frenzied herd of Godgie lizards surged into sight over the rise that had previously hidden its advance. Tens of thousands of Godgies were running pell-mell toward the road at terrific speed. "Godgies stomping!" Mudpot yelled. "We're lost! We'll be sliced to ribbons! We'll be chopped to bitsy pieces by their claws!" But there was little that could be done. Mudpot's yells seemed swallowed within the increasing roar of thousands of claws clacking across the rocky ground.

Against the eerie sound that was rapidly increasing to a terrific roar, Helga kept doggedly on in her race for life. One glance at the onrushing horde of Godgies told Helga there was no escape for the caravan. As far as she could see, the plain was dark with the streaming horde of onrushing Godgies. It was as if a massive ocean wave were coming and there was no escaping. She could stop and be torn to pieces within moments by the monitors at her back or keep running in the hope the Godgies might turn aside at the sight of the monitor train.

The dragon train route crossed the path of the annual Godgie migration to their nesting grounds. Godgie lizards—long, sleek, and capable of incredible speed—weighed only about four pounds. The free-spirited Godgies usually lived apart as loners or in small bands. But in the annual migration to the nesting grounds, they joined in herds of tens of thousands—sometimes as many as 200,000 in a single herd. The migrating herds bolted across the Flats at a frenzied pace. There was no food on the Godgie Stomp Flats so the herds crossed rapidly to reach the nesting grounds on the other side.

The running of the monitor trains usually avoided the annual Godgie Stomp, but the long rains this year had delayed the caravans far too long. As soon as the rains stopped, Mudpot ran out his monitor train, hoping to beat the first herds of the Stomp. It was running a risk to cross now, but financial ruin was the alternative. Waiting until the final stomping herds had passed would delay the caravan for several more weeks. It was a gamble that the Dragon Boss and Monopole had

taken and the gamble had now been lost. As Mudpot watched the vast Godgie herd descending upon his caravan, he knew the caravan was doomed.

Racing toward the monitor train, tens of thousands of Godgies swarmed in a maddened surge across the plain. Gooodg-Oog-looo! Oog-Oog-looo! The low "goooodg-oog-looo" calls of the surging Godgies, combining with the clacking claws of the advancing multitude, ripped the air with a surreal unbroken thunder. Although the Godgies were relatively small, the vast stampeding herd caused the earth to fairly tremble.

As the leading edge of the Godgie horde closed on the monitor train, Mudpot could see the gleaming yellow eyes and rapidly flicking tongues of those in the front rank. The great mass of rushing lizards followed the leaders at the front and the leaders followed ancient instinct. Whether the leaders were actually leading the surging herd or being pushed by the unstoppable pressure from behind did not matter.

When the flood of lizards hit the caravan, the Godgies streamed over and through the monitor train as if it were just another part of the landscape. Hissing and twisting violently as the Godgie's claws raked across their backs and heads, the monitors lashed out with their jaws. Straining at their harness, they broke free and all-out bedlam ensued.

Mudpot, at the center of the dust and chaos, was overrun and knocked to the ground by the frenzied jumping and skittering herd. A shower of sand and gravel kicked up by the Godgies' feet pelted Mudpot in the face. Any vision of the horizon or the sky lost beneath the endless, ever-widening waves of Godgies, he struggled to rise, yelling and trying to swing his whip. Choked by dust, clothes slit to ribbons by numberless clawed feet running across him, bleeding as if cut twice across every inch of his body, he sank helplessly beneath the onslaught.

The monitors, famished after their long run, struck out ferociously at the Godgies swarming over them. Frenzied confusion erupted as the hungry monitors lashed out with their massive jaws. One hapless Godgie after another was snapped in half by the monitors' razor-sharp teeth. But the vast herd kept coming, oblivious to any danger.

When the first wave of Godgies hit the caravan, the monitors went berserk. Snapping and slashing with their teeth, they twisted with all their strength in their harness, trying to catch the Godgies in their powerful jaws. In the first seconds of this chaos, one of the monitors directly behind Helga jerked at the harness with such power that one side of it snapped. Sensing the new freedom of movement, the monitor gave a sharp slashing bite at the other side of the harness with his teeth. The tough harness did not break under the bite, but it was

weakened enough that when the monitor yanked back the other direction to catch a Godgie it, too, snapped.

The leading team of monitors was now free and began feasting on Godgies. It would have been better for them to run. Like a single massive wave, the Godgie horde overwhelmed the monitors with the sheer power of an unending rush of bodies. Snapping and chomping at the Godgies, ever fighting, never wearying, still not even the ferocious monitors could stop the Godgies or turn aside their flight. Soon, they, too, lay silent beneath the still surging horde.

When the harness had snapped, Helga had pulled with all her might and she, too, became free from the caravan harness. Unlike the monitors, Helga sensed that her only hope was to keep running, just as she had been running—but this time at the head of the Godgie Stomp! Flying like the wind, with Godgies running all around her, Helga again was running as if her life depended on it. She realized that running with the Godgies was the only way to keep from being trampled by the Stomp. And off she went, forcing her exhausted body to its maximum speed, running neck and neck with the Stomp.

# Reginald to the Rescue

When Captain Red Whale Gumberpott and Fishbum first slipped over the side of the *Daring Dream* to escape the coming onslaught of the Wrackshees, neither had any idea what they would do next.

"Quiet now, Fishbum, my good mate," Red Whale whispered as they struggled against the eddies surrounding their ship. "Let's head to the stern and cling to the rudder until we see what's about," Red Whale continued. "Once we see what's up, we'll make a plan."

"What if they slaughter the crew?" Fishbum asked, sorrowfully.

"Now, mate, are you thinkin' Capt' Red Whale would have abandoned his crew to be slaughtered in their sleep? Oh, ya pain me, Fishbum! Why, I'd never have slid over the side on a night like that! No, there'll be no blood runnin' this night—them Wrackshees want slaves, not dead beasts. We goes over the side to have a chance of savin' the crew, not to let 'em be roasted!"

Time was shorter than desired, however. Red Whale had not completed cheering up his mate when the first of the Wracksee kayaks came around the bow. Seeing the outlines of the Wrackshees against the same starry sky he'd looked on with such joy shortly before, Red Whale motioned silently to Fishbum. Taking deep gulps of air, they submerged silently and followed the side of the ship underwater toward the stern. Surfacing twice to take nips of fresh air, Red Whale and Fishbum reached the rudder without causing notice.

Clinging to the rudder chains, heads low and in the shadows, they listened to the nearly soundless attack of the Wrackshees. The Wrackshees approached the *Daring Dream* at speed, but so quietly that Red Whale guessed they mush have their paddles wrapped to muffle the sound. The kayaks approached and encircled the ship completely. Red Whale noted that most of the Wrackshee boats were highly maneuverable, one-beast kayaks, capable of swift and agile attack. Behind the on-rushing wave of attackers, he also could see several large catamarans and some smaller, single-sail skiffs. He took note that the catamarans hung back, taking no part in the attack, and that each skiff carried two Wrackshee archers. The skiffs took up position within bow range at regular points around *Daring Dream,* apparently to provide cover for the attackers if needed.

When the circle was complete, the majority closed on the ship and

the attackers used small grappling hooks to secure climbing ropes on all sides. As soon as the hooks were thrown, the Wrackshees threw flash gourds up on the deck. As explosions rocked the *Daring Dream,* the attackers leapt up the ropes and boarded the ship from all sides.

Because Red Whale and Fishbum had been the ship's watch detail, the surprise was complete. The crew ran up from their bunks below, but in complete confusion. Unprepared for an attack, and finding the main deck swarming with an over-whelming force of Wrackshees, the crew surrendered without violence. A huge Wrackshee, with bulging arms and a head of long, shaggy orange hair, shouted in a lion-like, roaring voice, so that all the outlying Wrackshee kayaks might hear: "The ship is ours! Kayaks to the side—come to me! There'll be no escaping now. Every beast is subdued and disarmed—and such a liver-hearted, sleepy-headed crew! Such a sorry lot o' sea-beasts I never saw! Why they're so easy o' surrender that we've no need to scrape the decks with their heads! Who is the weak-kneed captain here?"

"That would be myself," Katteo Jor'Dane announced boldly, stepping forward. "And might I inquire if you are you the slug-brained chief of these smelly thugs?" she continued sarcastically.

The Wrackshee leader tilted his head and eyed Katteo dangerously. "And who might this be who's first to be volunteerin' for me to scrape the deck with her face?" Although the main drift of the question was decidedly unpleasant, the look betrayed surprise and uncertainty.

Katteo was quick to pick up on the surprised curiosity in the Wrackshee's look. "Aye, mate," Katteo said with a rasping, threatening voice, "we sliced the spleens of our previous Captain into ribbons and fed him to the sharks. Then we got hit by the hurricane and battled the waves for days—so, yes, we was takin' a little rest. But, I'll be thankin' you not to bad-mouth my crew, Dog-breath—or, Ol' Suzy here might be tempted to just decide to spend no more time on you!" Instantly, Katteo revealed a cutlass concealed under her sea-cloak. Pulling the blade out dramatically, the cutlass sliced a long arc toward the Wrackshee, just nicking his cheek enough for a thin line of red blood to appear amidst the orange fur. "That's my calling card, Dog-breath," Katteo laughed. You may have taken the ship, but you have not taken our spirit!"

Outraged that one of the *Daring Dream* crew would dare such an act, the Wrackshee leader stepped close to the upstart sea-beast. "Yes, my bug-eating roach, I took your ship—and I care not about your spirit, because it will do you no good when you are sinking to the bottom of the sea." Turning to the Wrackshee horde massed behind him, he gave the order: "No quarter for such a wildcat. Subdue her!"

Wrackshees swarmed forward, and in the blink of an eye, Katteo was disarmed and bound, head to toe, in ropes.

The Wrackshee chieftain directed that Katteo be carried to the stern of the ship and lifted onto the gunwale. “Now, my Bug-brained Wildcat, do you want to leap off yourself, like a brave beast, or would you rather admit you are a cowardly rascal and have us throw you overboard? In either case, putting you off the rear of the ship show’s best to all to leave you in the past, while the rest of us go forward.”

“The only cowards here be yourselves!” Katteo declared. “And rascal is too good a word for the likes of you Dung-swilling Hell-bounders! Nay, I’ll not take more of your filthy hands—I’m away on my own powers—my spirit whole, and off to see new adventures!” With that, Katteo gave a hop and dropped out of sight—KER-SPLOOSH!

Alas for the Wrackshees, they should have thought again of their hasty act, for listening below were, of course, Captain Red Whale Gumberpott and his good mate, Fishbum. When the Wrackshee kayaks were summoned to the ship, abandoning their watch, Red Whale and Fishbum breathed a deep sigh of relief. Pulling themselves up and hanging their arms over the rudder chains, they listened with great interest to the proceedings above them.

Hearing Katteo’s speech and seeing her fall past them into the sea, Fishbum silently slipped into the water and swam underwater to where Katteo was struggling in her bonds. Coming up beneath his struggling comrade, Fishbum tugged firmly on Katteo’s trouser leg until she stopped her struggles and allowed him to untie her feet. Now able to stay afloat by kicking her legs, Katteo still kept up the sounds of her struggle so as not to draw the attention of the Wrackshees back to her.

Soon, Fishbum has also freed Katteo’s arms and Fishbum said softly, covered by the continuing sounds of Katteo’s dramatic struggle, “Now for the finale of your acting debut—drowning—make it real and trust me.” Taking a deep breath, Fishbum slid under the surface and pulled hard on Katteo, dragging her underwater. A more convincing image of an exhausted, drowning beast slipping into Davy Jones’s Locker was never presented. Once below the waves, and out of sight, Fishbum guided Katteo to the darkness behind the rudder workings where Red Whale was waiting.

A gray-red dawn was beginning to streak the sky as the three comrades silently greated one another. The opportunity for happy reunion was short-lived, however, because cries and activity on the ship called their attention.

“Butter-Slaggers coming along! Lines and ladders down! Slaves to the Butter Dock in time for breakfast! HORT-HAR-HORT! Breakfast—a stew of spiders and beetles for the lucky beasts! HORT-HAR-HORT!” The Wrackshee chief roared out in his bellowing style. The sounds of

running feet, lines being hauled, and the cursing grunts of beasts straining at their work, painted a picture not lost on Red Whale. "Crinoo!" Red Whale cursed under his breath. "They're going to steal away our mates! We've got to make a plan."

While Red Whale, Fishbum, and Katteo began their urgent deliberations, several large catamaran-style boats pulled alongside *Daring Dream*. The roughly-made vessels were constructed of two sets of logs, four or five in a group, strapped together with strong grass rope, then joined, one set to another, by a "deck" of woven ropes, supported by a light wooden frame. Two broad woven-reed prows, fronting the bundles of logs, allowed the boat to cut the waves with some grace.

"Butter-Slaggers along and ladder down to the Wreckers!" The repeated call, made eight times, counted off the number of catamarans that pulled aside *Daring Dream* to take away the captured crew. Quickly, the crew of captured sea-beasts was hurried down the rope ladders onto the Butter-Slaggers. Alighting in the catamarans, the captives were greeted by Wreckers—mountain-sized Wrackshees detailed only to the hauling of slaves to the Butter Dock—seven feet or more in height, each one with the strength of ten beasts—scimitars and daggers bristling from their belts.

"See here now, Wreckers!" the Wrackshee leader roared out from the *Daring Dream* helm. "Every one of you as reaches the Butter Dock with no escapes or dead beasts, there's an extra lump of gold for you!"

"Ho-Ho!" Red Whale thought to himself, smiling. "I wonder if that includes us?" For while the slaves were being loaded, Red Whale, Fishbum, and Katteo had swum under the *Daring Dream* and come up under together beneath one of the Butter-Slaggers. Catching hold of the underside corners of the woven-rope decking, the daring comrades well hidden and able to have their heads above water to breathe. "Ho-Ho! I think there may be more than an extra lump of gold coming to them with this cargo!" Red Whale had very good feelings about this turn of events.

Red Whale had great fun listening to the Wreckers arguing above him.

"Yah! It must be a bad current running against us. There's no wind, but we can't keep up with the others!"

"Blast it, Doggo, it's just the lot of those slaves playing slacker at the paddles!"

"Not so—looks to me like they're pulling for all they're worth."

"Yah! It's a bad current running, I tell you! What else could it be? Maybe this bunch of sea-beasts are just heavier than they look!"

Red Whale could hardly keep from laughing out loud. "Sure, and that's the problem," he smiled, "this bunch of sea-beasts is, indeed, a

whole lot heavier than it looks!"

Red Whale's good humor did not last long, however. When the Butter-Slagger was about a mile off-shore, it began to cross the long rocky reef that protected the harbor. Sea-going ships had to enter the harbor by rounding the reef far down the coast, then sailing up the deeper channel behind the reef. Butter-Slaggers, however, were designed to cross the reef. Riding high in the water, and built to take pounding that would tear any ordinary boat to pieces, they skimmed over the treacherous rocks.

For the comrades hanging beneath the slagger, it was the end of the voyage. The reef left no room for them to continue their stealthy ride. At the first insistent touch of the jagged rocks, Red Whale, Fishbum, and Katteo parted ways with the Butter-Slagger. In the spreading light of the dawn, the three comrades watched in dismay as the slagger danced across the rough current boiling across the reef. An impassable barrier now stood between them and their captive shipmates rapidly disappearing into slavery!

With the natural instinct for self-preservation, and the stalwart sea-beasts' slight capacity for swimming, the three friends struck out along the reef, looking for any possible break in the barrier. The dangerous current, continually threatening to crush them against the deadly rocks, soon exhausted their remaining energy, however.

Gasping for air and losing strength rapidly, the three comrades at last pulled themselves up on a single rock, sticking up out of the waves foaming and lashing around it. Slippery and not at all level, the rock provided a precarious, but welcome, temporary haven from the thrashing sea. Relieved, the exhausted beasts collapsed and closed their eyes for a brief respite.

Katteo noticed it first. Her exhausted, labored breathing had barely returned to normal when an overwhelming odor of fish assaulted her nostrils. The unbelievably fishy smell was accompanied by a loud strange bellowing and honking—as if someone were yelling through their nose.

"What on earth?" Katteo stammered as she sat up and looked around.

"Sea lions," Red Whale replied, sitting up. "But where are they? I've seen them before and the smell and sound always hit you first—but they can't be far off."

"OHO, THERE! SCHNORT-SCHUZUCK! MOVE OVER AND MAKE WAY!" With that announcement and a flop, flop, flop, a huge Sea-lion pulled himself up on the rock beside the sea-beasts.

"AL-OHO, THERE!" the Sea-lion bellowed. "SCHNORT-SCHUZUCK-SNORT-SNORT—AH, THAT'S BETTER—HAD A BIT OF CRAB SHELL STUCK IN MY THROAT THERE FOR A MOMENT! EXCUSE ME WHILE

I CATCH MY BREATH!"

The Sea-lion had slid up the extremely slippery rock with the greatest of ease. With astonishing speed, its long cylindrical body seemed to glide up the rock, defying gravity. Flopping to a stop in front of the three comrades, its body shortened into a squat, immense mountain of flesh—nearly the size of all three sea-beasts put together. The almost bear-ish head and neck, would suddenly thrust out, turtle-fashion, with over-sized eyes peering closely when the beast talked in his bellowing, snorting manner.

"HUURRUMPFF! GRRUMPT! PARDON ME IF I'M INTERRUPTING! SCHNORCKT! I'VE BEEN FISHING AND, AS I SAID—SCHUZUCKT—GOT SOME CRAB SHELL STUCK—MY FAVORITE MEAL, OF COURSE—THAT CRACKLY, CRUNCHY, SALTY OUTSIDE, AND SQUISHY, WARM GUTS INSIDE—YUMM—ANYWAY, WON'T BE HERE LONG AND DON'T MEAN TO BARGE IN ON ANYTHING! SNORCHNORT!"

Red Whale, Fishbum, and Katteo exchanged bemused looks. "There now, friend, don't you be worrying on our account," Fishbum said. "Why you've got as much right and need to be on this rock as we do. But, what's your name? We'd be honored to know your name."

"REGINALD M.Q., AND THE HONOR OF KNOWING YOU IS MINE, I ASSURE YOU," the Sea-lion replied. "AND WHAT PROUD NAMES DO YOU HOLD FOR YOURSELVES? SNORCHNORT! SNORCHNORT! SPPITT—SORRY THERE, OLD SPOT, FINALLY GOT THAT BLASTED CRAB SHELL DISLODGED AND—YOU KNOW—JUST HAD TO CLEAR MY THROAT, YOU UNDERSTAND—NOT MEANING TO SPPITT ON YOU. SNORCHNORT! SPPITT!—OH SORRY, THERE, OLD SPOT, THAT ONE GOT AWAY FROM ME. NO HARM DONE, THOUGH—JUST FLICK IT OFF ANYWHERE. NOW, I SAY AGAIN, WHAT PROUD NAMES DO YOU HOLD FOR YOURSELVES?"

The three sea-beasts introduced themselves and fell into animated conversation with Reginald. When the Sea-lion learned of their current predicament, he was outraged. "WRACKSHEES IS IT? SCHNISST! POOPER-SCHOONCT! WHY THE POWERS OF CREATION DO NOT FEED THEM TO THE SHARKS, I CANNOT FATHOM! SHNORRT! WHY, I'LL HELP YOU RECOVER YOUR MATES! JUST YOU ALL CLIMB ABOARD AND I'LL HAVE YOU ACROSS THIS LITTLE REEF IN NO TIME!"

"Us? Ride on you?" Red Whale said. "That seems a little disrespectin' of your eminence, it's not exactly the way me Mum taught me, you see…."

"STUFFER-NONE-SUCH-SENSE!" The Sea-lion bellowed, more loudly than before. "SCHNORRCKT! GUZZZANSHNORT! WHY DO YOU THINK I'VE GOT SHOE-LEATHER ALL OVER ME AND FOUR INCHES OF BLUBBER UNDER THAT? THOSE WRACKSHEES ARE SO

PROUD OF THEIR SLAGGERS—WHY I JUST SLIDE RIGHT ACROSS THE WHOLE MESS! SCHNORCKT!"

Reginald was extremely angry now—his huge neck bulging, ferocious-looking teeth snapping. He roared and bellowed, the stiff bristles on his nose quivering like trees in a high wind. And, of course, the loud bellowing that seemed like words exploding deep in his sinuses.

"CLIMB ABOARD, FRIENDS! I'LL HAVE YOU ON YOUR WAY IN THE TIME IT TAKES ME TO SNAP THE SHELL OF CRAB IN MY TEETH!"

Red Whale, Fishbum, and Katteo all climbed up on the immense beast, straddling his massive girth as best they could with their legs. But, once they were aboard, Reginald did not move, nor did he say anything. He appeared to be lost in thought and almost unaware of their presence on his back. Minutes dragged by and still nothing happened.

At last, Red Whale ventured to ask, "Say there, Reginald, old salt, did you say we'd be leaving soon? I'm a bit worried that our shipmates may be breaking rock before can rescue them."

"SSZZZSCHORCHT! YOU WERE PERHAPS IMAGINING REGINALD M.Q. WAS SOMEONE ELSE? PERHAPS YOU IMAGINED HIM A COD-BRAIN OR SOMETHING? OF COURSE YOUR MATES ARE TIP-TOP-TIP IN MY MIND. SNORCHT! SZZORCKT! I'VE BEEN CONSIDERING THE BEST WAY TO EFFECT A RESCUE. JUST GETTING YOU ACROSS THE REEF DOES NOT HELP ALL THAT MUCH—SCHNORFT-SCHNOOFT—AND WHAT WOULD YOU DO THEN? SWIM THE REST OF THE WAY? NO-NO-NO-NO-NOHOOFT! THERE'S A MUCH BETTER PLAN!"

Reginald was so pleased with himself that his hearty laughter set his immense body jiggling. As convulsive waves rippled through the Sea-lions flabby frame, the three comrades were nearly thrown off his back. "HOOOCH-HOOOCH-HAAACKKK-HAAACKKK-HOOOCHT! OH, IT'S TOO MUCH! WE'LL SET THE WIGGERS ON THEM! HOOOCH-HOOOCH-HAAACCKK! THE BORF WILL LOVE IT!"

"Borf, Reginald? And who would the Borf be?" asked Katteo.

"BORF RAIDING PARTIES ARE THE SCOURGE OF SLAVERS AND THEIR KIND! SCHNORKT! SCHZZORKT! OH, I REALLY NEED ANOTHER CRAB—ANYBODY SEEN A CRAB—OH, SO CRUNCHY ON THE OUTSIDE AND, OH, SO WARM AND SQUISHY ON THE INSIDE—OH, YES, LATER—NOW THE BORF HAVE A CAMP NOT FAR DOWN THE COAST. I TAKE YOU TO THEIR CAMP AND THEY HELP YOU GET YOUR CREW BACK! SZZCHORFT! AND NO SWIMMING IN SHARK TERRITORY—OH, I FORGOT TO TELL YOU ABOUT THAT—THAT'S ANOTHER REASON YOU WOULDN'T WANT TO SWIM INTO

PORT NEWORF! SCHORKT-SCHZZZOORT! THOSE SHARKS ARE NOT VERY FRIENDLY—MORE LIKE SLICE YOU UP AND SELL YOU FOR THE GRILL! NO, YOU'RE BETTER OFF WITH THE BORF!"

Reginald gathered himself and set off, flopping and lumbering along with surprising speed, following the rocky reef up the coast. Red Whale, Fishbum, and Katteo rode along in something less than comfort—but happy, knowing they could never move across the jagged, slippery rocks without Reginald's help.

# Too Much Slug Beer

The pleasant, raspy cooing of trallés, piled on top of one another in their wagon, brought smiles to the faces of Reek and Stench as they rode along in their skimmer, now turned wagon. They joked, drank Slug Beer, and periodically lashed the team of slaves pulling them along.

"Yep," Reek sighed happily as he took deep draws on his Slug Beer, "we've got 'er made now. A good lot of trallés to sell—we'll be rich in no time."

"Well, not so fast, there, Reek—working for Milky Joe's going to slow down our getting rich. It appears as he's got our gold to buy the trallés and all we get is Slug Beer until they sells, of which he gets 80% of the profit."

"Ah, don't gripe so much, Stench," Reek replied. "Why, I'd say Milky Joe did us a fine favor letting us join one of his caravans. Since he's got the trallé market cornered in these parts, we'd have ended up on the pointed end of a dagger, trying to go it alone. Those big hulking Wreckers he sent to educate us about the customs of trading in these parts probably saved our lives."

"Oh, yeah, Reek," his partner replied, "a right fine favor to send those goons to take all our money for the favor of not leaving a bludgeon stuck firmly in each eye socket and a dagger in the spleen!"

"Whoa, quiet like, there, Stench. I wouldn't want to spook anyone with your complainin'—might not sit too good with Milky's ears—I hear he's got a lot o' them on his caravans."

"My, my, Reek," Stench said, "here I thought you were Milky Joe's good little friend."

"I'm alive, got all the Slug Beer I want, and have prospects I didn't have yesterday. Seems like it's not too bad so far," Reek snorted.

As Reek and Stench talked, the caravan plodded on its way, passing through the broad, open country leading gradually into the foothills of the Don'ot Mountains. Just as the sun began to fall towards the peaks of the distant mountains, word passed that the caravan would make camp for the night.

Chaining the slaves, in groups, to trees near the campsite, the travelers made campfires and began to cook their simple meal of Whack-Beans, Pot-Smashers, and more Slug Beer. Darkness came

quickly once the sun dropped behind the mountains and within a couple of hours after eating, the caravan-beasts were curled in their heavy blankets, feet toward the fire, fast asleep. Although trallé caravans were favorite targets of Borf raiders, the caravan mounted no watch, since Borf attacks were never carried out so close to Port Newolf, but only in the areas much closer to the Borf homelands. Stench and Reek, like the other caravan-beasts, fell into the heavy sleep associated with drinking plenty of Slug Beer. Except for the frequent popping of gassy exhaust from the Whack-Beans, the camp settled into peaceful slumber.

# Wicked's Cove

Not far from where the trallé caravan was encamped, however, another party of travelers was approaching. The second group of travelers were a curious sight: there were nearly fifty of them, and except for three adult sea-beasts, the rest were young Squirrels and Coyotes, perhaps ten or eleven years old, all of whom had painted, notched ears, and wore low, flattened hats. Adding to the curious appearance of the travelers was the fact that the young beasts were riding, two-by-two, mounted on huge, ferocious-looking monitors! Immediately behind the mounted young beasts walked Red Whale, Fishbum, and Katteo Jor'Dane.

Reginald, filled with endless good humor and reckless energy, had carried the sea-beast comrades far down the rocky reef, to a small cove called Wicked's Sport. "SHNORCKT-SNOOZZCHT! YOU'LL FIND ALL THE HELP YOU NEED AT WICKEDS," Reginald had said. Sure enough, arriving at Wicked's Sport, the three sea-beast comrades were astonished: dozens of young Squirrels and Coyotes, all adorned with brightly-painted, notched ears, engaged in what appeared to be a unique kind of play—riding massive, terrifying monitor lizards on the beach!

Riding—standing up—on the backs of monitors, completing flips while riding, jumping, with twists and somersaults, from one monitor to another—the skill of the young beasts amazed the comrades.

"THESE ARE BORF NOCKS—YOUNG BORF—SCHZZOOZZSHORCKT!—OOOO, SORRY ABOUT THAT, SOMETIMES CRAB GUTS GIVE ME GAS! ANYWAY—SCHZZOOZZSHORCKT-PFFUZOTTT-SCHZZZOOZZZSHORCKT—OH, MY, THAT WAS A DOOZIE! NOW, AS I WAS SAYING—TO SURVIVE IN THE ROUGH WORLD OF THE BORF, YOU'VE GOT TO BE STRONG AND SMART. IN THE WILD COUNTRY WHERE THE BORF LIVE, NO STRENGTH, NO SMARTS, NO LIVE LONG—SNOOORCKT! SO THE NOCKS ARE SENT DOWN HERE TO GAIN STRENGTH AND SMARTS WHILE THEY PLAY! IF YOU ASK THEM FOR HELP—SCHZZZOOZZZ—SHORCKT-PFFFFUTTT-ZOO SCHZOOZZSHORCKT—SORRY THERE OLD SPOT, PARDON ME—THEY WILL BE GLAD TO HELP YOU, I'M SURE."

"Are there no adults here?" Red Whale asked.

"OH YES," Reginald replied, "THERE'S ADULTS HERE—LOOK UP

ON THE BLUFF OVER THERE.” He pointed to the high ground above the beach where a group of adult Borf could be seen running furiously and tossing large nets at each other.

“WICKED’S COVE IS A SECRET RETREAT FOR BORF NOCKS AND ADULTS LEARNING TO USE NETS IN ATTACKS ON trallé CARAVANS —SCHZZOOCKT—ooooffconorckt—oh, my, iT FEELS LIKE i may have overdone it a bit today, carrying you all after such a heavy meal—but, as i say, BORF ARE MASTERS WITH NETS, BUT THEY COME HERE TO WORK ON STRATEGY AND SKILLS AGAINST THE CARAVANS.”

“How can they help us,” Katteo asked.

“ASK THEM TO MAKE A RAID ON ONE OF THE trallé CARAVANS THAT COME OUT OF PORT NEWOLF—SCHNORCHT—aH, THAT’S MUCH BETTER—RAID THE trallés THEN USE THEM TO BUY YOUR MATES BACK—THAT’S MUCH BETTER THAN THE THREE OF YOU TRYING TO GET THEM BACK YOURSELVES—SZZZOOOOOCKT—I FEAR YOU’D END UP IN A MOST UNHAPPY CONDITION IF YOU TRIED THAT.”

# Borf Raiders

A wild trampling sound awoke Reek. He had no time to reflect on what it was, as a large, heavy net dropped over him and Stench. Although not firmly entangled, the time it took for Reek and Stench to rouse from their slumber and struggle free from the net, afforded the Borf raiders sufficient time to make off with their trallés. A similar fate befell the other caravan-beasts. In the blink of an eye, all trallés were carried away from the camp, while other Borf broke the chain holding the slaves to free them. As quickly as the raid began, the dozens of Squirrels and Coyotes who had silently raced through the caravan camp, creating confusion and chaos, had vanished into the night—taking every single trallé and slave with them.

"Stam-stamer-ast!" Fishbum exulted, "that was fantastic! They didn't even know what hit them before you were gone again!"

"That's our way," puffed the Borf carrying Fishbum on his back, as he ran furiously along. Borf raids were the essence of speed—lightning fast, the raiders swept into a camp in the dead of night, creating confusion, running furiously, tossing nets to entangle the caravan beasts, carrying off trallés, but doing no real harm to anyone.

The raiders ran furiously until they were far from the caravan track. Then, they met up with other Borf who were keeping monitor mounts at the ready. Raiding so far from home, and so near to Port Newolf, the Borf wanted to leave the area as quickly as possible. The Borf had only in recent times managed to domesticate the fearsome "dragon" monitors. Borf were the only beasts who had tried to domesticate monitors—and, for most beasts, the monitors existed only in fearsome legends. Caravans sometimes employed monitors, but only wild ones—the spirited savagery of wild monitors fit the needs of rapid passage caravans perfectly.

Fully-loaded Borf monitors, however, because they were properly fed, groomed, and trained, moved even more rapidly—some said their feet never touched the ground. Even when somewhat domesticated, the skitterish, fearsome lizards were so dangerous to handle that even Borf preferred to walk or run in most situations—except in circumstances such as on the current raid, where an exceptionally rapid escape was needed, or when some of the best trained monitors were used for other purposes.

Running to the meeting place, Borf carried Fishbum, Red Whale, and Katteo. The Borf could not afford for anything to slow down their movements. Other Borf carried trallés, and still others were at the rear laying traps to trip up any of the caravan beasts who dared to chase after the raiders.

“Do you expect them to chase us?” Fishbum asked.

“Not to worry,” the Borf runner panted, “most of the caravan beasts only get Slug Beer for pay and don’t want to tangle with our traps—they likely won’t come after us—and if they do, well—No more questions! I can’t run and talk.”

# Dragon-Conjurer

Two days later, Red Whale and Katteo Jor'Dane appeared in Port Newolf disguised as wealthy traders, wearing expensive clothes and the finest, stylish boots and hats. Putting out word that they were "somewhat hollow in the middle"—meaning without ethics—they let it be known that they had some of the finest trallés ever seen round about and were looking to buy a large lot of slaves to work their estates.

Milky Joe, the principal trader in "nasties" of any sort in Port Newolf, was instantly suspicious of the newly-arrived couple, but also intrigued by their talk of rich tea estates across the Great Sea that required the work of immense numbers of slaves. The strange couple spoke of paying astonishing amounts for slaves—three trallés per slave, an unheard of sum! Nearly wild with greed, but also suspecting a possible trick, Milky Joe sent a runner to consult Colonel Snart, the High One's Monopole of Hedgelands-bound caravans, who was responsible for all commerce into the Hedgie realm.

Being an even greedier beast than Milky Joe, the Monopole commanded that Milky Joe conduct the intriguing couple to Mis'tashe, the way-station between Port Newolf and the Hedgelands, where black-market trade in slaves and trallés was often carried on. Distant from settlements, hidden from view, and controlled by Colonel Snart, Mis'tashe was a place where commerce of unusual sorts often occurred. Slaves might be switched from one buyer's order to another buyer at higher price, trallés bound for one dealer, might be redirected to another, and so on, as best suited Colonel Snart's interests. No beast entered the extremely remote wilds of Mis'tashe unless invited by the Monopole, which made it convenient to blame delayed or missing orders for slaves or trallés on all manner of catastrophes: Borf raids, avalanches, epidemics, earthquakes, and so on and on. Mis'tashe provided a perfect place for black-market trading with intriguing wealthy buyers. And, under the watchful eye of the Monopole's ruffians, should there be any trouble with double-dealing buyers, it would be impossible for them to escape.

Red Whale and Katteo, although feeling encouraged by the success of their disguises, also were proceeding with great care. Although Milky Joe had assigned a detail of Wreckers to "safely conduct" his

wealthy customers to Mis'tashe, the travelers insisted on bringing along their own body-guard: a huge monitor!

When the party was ready to depart, Milky Joe insisted that Red Whale and Katteo should go first, so the Wreckers could keep an eye on them. The wealthy couple refused, however, and after what amounted to a trivial argument—greed once again clouding better reason—the party set out for Mis'tashe with the wealthy couple at the rear, riding astride their monitor! Having never before seen a monitor up close, but knowing the legendary ferocity of the giant lizards, Milky Joe was now even more impressed with these unusual customers. Any beast who could tame such a terror, and bend it to his will, must indeed be a great and important beast! Having planned to accompany the rich buyers to Mis'tashe, the addition of the monitor to the party, and the effect this had on his reflections on the couple, caused Milky Joe to change his mind, and the group departed without him.

As the group proceeded to Mis'tashe, the constant sound of the monitor drooling and snapping its jaws, and the frequent dull crunching as Red Whale fed the monitor dried shark meat, made the Wrecker escort increasingly jumpy. For a time the jitters among the escort beasts remained contained within each Wrecker, none of them wanting to admit their uneasiness. But the further they traveled and the more reflections on their strange circumstances played on their imaginations, the more openly troubled the Wreckers became.

Ignorant and superstitious, the Wreckers began to mutter among themselves about what could only be a supernatural power that controlled the monitor. "I wouldn't mind it so much," one of the Wreckers said, "if it were some other beast than a dragon! Just ain't natural that they're riding a dragon pretty as you please! They've got that dragon under a spell—it's leagued with evil powers, I'll be bound!"

"Oh, aye, and for sure that's right," another one said uneasily. "Even if they was dressed and acted like raving magicians or wizards, I'd feel better—but just to be normal beasts, carrying on like there's not a thing amiss, gives me the creeps—can only be bad, bad, bad I say!"

"Any why do you think Milky Joe dropped us at that last moment? Tell me that! Why he knew we was conducting demons and playin' with the evil powers—that's why! He sold us out—lettin' us carry on with things that'll have hold of spirits if we don't watch out!"

"Yah! Milky Joe sold us out—leavin' us like that to face demons!"

As the mutterings among the Wreckers grew louder, Red Whale and Katteo could barely contain their laughter. They could see the tide was turning in their favor even more than they had planned!

“And don’t you hear them feedin’ that dragon, and those jaws workin’ and that shark flesh tearin’ and him just crunchin’ those bones like nobeast’s business?”

“I say we get outta here right off,” one of the Wreckers cried out fearfully.

“Aye!” another yelled.

“That’s the go!” another agreed. “We’ll just up and leave them right here and let them use their magic and demons and dragon-spells to get themselves outta here!”

With that, one of the Wreckers, known as D’LoodD, turned to Red Whale and Katteo and announced loudly, “All right ya dragon-spellin’ demon-dealin’ fancy-hats! We’re onto you and we’re leavin’—Milky Joe made a bad, bad deal and he knew it—so’s he left us alone for dragon bait! Yah, we know’s about baitin’ dragons! That’s what they do with those Tilk Duraow runners! Yah, we know! And we’re not fools! So, no insults intended, except the bits of truth I just said that might sound insultin’—but we’re done and leavin’ you. Mis’tashe ain’t more than another couple of hours up the trail there—you’ll make it fine by yourself! Milky Joe took the greedy and safe road—but we’re smart enough to take the safe road and leave it at that!”

“Now wait just a twinkle,” Katteo said smiling broadly. “I know what you’re thinking and what you’re fearful of—and you’re right, we do have a spell over this dragon!” Katteo glanced side-ways at Red Whale, giving him a sly wink. “Now think a moment, my dear beast,” she continued. “If I have a spell on this dragon, keeping him from eating you, don’t you know I could pull that spell off faster than you can say, ‘DEAD!’” she said, emphasizing the last word loudly.

The Wreckers were now trembling with terror as Katteo continued, “Aye, so I could do that—and, if you run off, I could just take off the spell and let the dragon fly after you! Yes, I can make the dragon fly! And I can conjure up as many as I want! So, I wouldn’t get too hasty on your departure.”

“Oh, don’t set the dragon on us!” D’LoodD pleaded, the other Wreckers adding their own desperate cries as well.

Smiling kindly, Katteo raised her arms in a gesture asking for quiet. With a tone of understanding and compassion, she said, “There, there, don’t be fearful. I won’t set the dragon on you—and, in fact, I’ll let you go free with gold in your pocket, if you will do a small favor for us.”

“Oh, yea, name your price!” D’LoodD cried out. “We’ll do anything for you, if you’ll spare our humble lives!”

“We want to double-deal Milky Joe—which should make you happy—we want to steal the slaves being offered to us from under his very nose—especially the first-quality ones taken from the *Daring*

*Dream*. Ha! You see, we're just like you, we don't trust Milky Joe and don't see any reason to treat him fair. So, what we want you to do is to go on with us to Mis'tashe and, when we get there, swear that Milky Joe was eaten by this here dragon on my command, and that you are sure I'll feed you and all of the Mis'tashe crew to my dragons also, if they don't do as I say. And, for this small favor—in addition to saving your lives—we will give each of you a solid gold coin."

The Wreckers, dumbfounded at their good fortune, immediately agreed with the plan. "Oh, thank you, thank you, mighty She-Hellion, Dragon-Conjurer!" D'LoodD exclaimed. "You can count on our grateful service!"

# The End for Sabre Tusk

Mis'tashe was a large and strongly built trading station, remote from all the lanes of normal commerce and frequented only by those trading beyond the law. But in a land where the "tidy little trades" were active, the station provided service to many a slaver or shadowy merchant. Built of sturdy gray stone, Mis'tashe had four wings, completely enclosing an open central square where slaves or trallés were held and displayed for sale. Windowless, except for double-grated openings in the single enormous iron door that served as the main entrance, Mis'tashe had an appropriately dismal and forbidding appearance, consistent with its work.

When Red Whale, Katteo, and their Wrecker escorts arrived at the station, the Wreckers, true to their promise, put on the performance of their lives.

"BEASTS OF THE TRADE! HEAR US WRECKERS! COME OUT AND HEAR US! ALL YOU BEASTS OF MIS'TASHE WHO WANT TO LIVE LONGER THAN AN HOUR! BEASTS OF THE TRADE! HEAR US WRECKERS! COME OUT AND HEAR US! WE WARN YOU OF POWERS THAT EVEN WE FEAR!"

This electrifying announcement brought beasts pouring out of Mis'tashe. The Wreckers were well-known to all the beasts at the station. Wreckers were tough, fearless, and strong—if they were fearful and had warnings to give, every beast wanted to hear about it! As the Mis'tashe beasts gathered, the Wreckers continued their frenzied yelling.

RUN! CLEAR OUT! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! THE CRAZY BEASTS RIDING THE DRAGON ARE POWERFUL WIZARDS AND CONJURERS!" yelled one.

"THE DRAGON'S UNDER THEIR SPELL! THEY TRICKED MILKY JOE AND THE DRAGON ATE HIM! SNAP-CRUNCH-SLURP—AND HE WAS A GONER—CLEAN AS A WHISTLE, NOT A SCRAP LEFT—NOT EVER A GREASY SPOT ON THE TRAIL—GONE—GONE—GONE!" moaned another, his eyes rolling in terror.

Another wailing Wrecker, drooling from his mouth, and shaking at the knees, yelled, "THE DRAGON-CONJURER CAN MAKE THEM FLY —AND SHE CAN MAKE AS MANY AS SHE NEEDS TO EAT US ALL! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! SHE'LL KILL US IF WE DON'T LEAVE THE

SLAVES AND GET OUT OF HERE!"

Another fell to the earth in a trembling mass of flesh, blubbering and jabbering incoherently. "DAA-DA-DU—DRAGOOSE—DRAGOOSOON—DARGOTON—CHOMPED JOWEE—AIEEE!" The poor beast began spinning on the ground like as if possessed by banshees. AIEEEEEEEE! DRAAGOOOOOOSOONE! ME GONEY!"

The effect of this dramatic performance was electric. Seeing the astonishing transformation of the burly, normally steel-nerved, Wreckers into a lot of blubbering, insane with terror beasts, drained every ounce of courage and reason out of the Mis'tashe guards and workers.

White-faced, the Mis'tashe beasts were frozen in terror for an instant. Then another most amazing thing happened, which sent them running pell-mell across the hills. One of the Wreckers, as part of his frenzied performance, cried out, "AND THE WORST OF IT IS THAT YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT OTHER STRANGE BEASTS SHE CAN CALL IN ON US! SHE CONTROLS THE VERY LEGIONS OF HELL—WHAT OTHER TERRORS CAN SHE CALL UPON US?"

At that very moment, all eyes were suddenly attracted to a curiously humorous, yet, for the Wreckers, terrifying, sight: A troop of nine beasts marching a stark, raving mad Rummer Boar before them at the point of a cutlass.

"By the powers of hell!" the Rummer yelled "Take me back to the King Lizard, you scalawags! Return me to my savior and protector! The lizard armies will keep the birds from pooping on my hat! Don't take me away from my King, my Lord!"

D'LoodD shouted, "SEE THE POWERS OF THE SHE-HELLION! SEE WHAT SHE'S DONE TO SABRE TUSK D'NEWOLF! THAT BE THE RUMMER BOAR CAPTAIN—AND NO DOUBT ABOUT IT! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!"

"SHE CALLED BIRDS DOWN ON HIM AND DESTROYED HIM!" another Wrecker screamed.

The more the Rummer Boar loudly raved, the more terror his insane ranting caused in the Wreckers and their fellow ruffians.

"AIEEEEEEAHHHHH!" The scream broke from each of the Wreckers and all the Mis'tashe staff as if in one voice. Breaking free from their frozen terror, every muscle went towards full-throated, fully active, terrified flight. In a few moments, Mis'tashe was empty—except for Red Whale, Katteo, their monitor, and the dozens of slaves being held inside the way-station slave dock.

"What now?" Katteo asked quizzically. "What's that all about?"

"I have no idea," Red Whale replied, "but a Rummer Boar's bad news wherever he shows up. I assume all those holding him captive can only be friendly beasts and we should aid them. I'll ride out and

greet our visitors. You stay here and see to the slaves—let them know what's happening. They may be pretty worked up by all they may have heard."

"Aye, aye, Capt'n!" Katteo grinned.

Mounting up, Red Whale gave Katteo a determined look and kicked the flanks of the monitor hard. Rearing back, the monitor slashed at the air with its jaws, then tore off like a bolt of lightning, heading straight toward the Rummer Boar and his escort.

Riding directly at the Rummer Boar was a stroke of genius, Red Whale realized as he closed on his prey. The massive dragon-lizard, jaws flashing and snapping, snarling and snorting, coming on like a hurricane from hell, broke the Rummer down completely. Collapsing to his knees, rambling on about bird's pooping on his feathers and pleading for the Lizard King's mercy, the Rummer looked blankly into the face of the fearsome monitor as Red Whale pulled up on the dragon's reins, stopping the monitor directly in front of the now-docile Rummer Boar. Not a word was spoken. Nothing need be said, as the razor-sharp teeth glistened inches from the Rummer's lowered head, and the dragon snorted hot breath nearly directly into the Boar's face. The days of Sabre Tusk d'Newolf, terror of the seas, were over.

# Helga and Breister Reunited

"Too-Way! friends—what ship?"

Mr. Tigg and Bomper Spits, awakening to find their boat washed up into shallow water near a sandy beach, were startled to see a Cow, an odd-looking Owl, and a female Cougar standing knee deep in the water, looking at them curiously.

Sensing the hail was a friendly greeting, Roolo replied, "Good breeze, mates! No ship at present, as you see—tight scrape a few nights back and wind smashed the ol' *Daring Dream* flat. Where are ya bound?"

"They call me Breister. Until recently, I was Toolmaster of O'Fallon's Bluff—that was a Wood Cow settlement within the Hedgelands. But now we've been banished and we're looking for my daughter, Helga, who came this way to help some shipwrecked sea-beasts she heard are in distress. So you see we're in a bit of a scrape ourselves."

"She would be looking for us!" Bomper yelled excitedly. "You must mean the *Daring Dream!*"

"Don't know the name," Breister replied, "might be that, or another—but you sure look like sea-beasts in need of help, which is good enough for me. Now, have you seen my daughter? Did she find you and get you sailing again?"

"Crinoo!" Roolo cursed. "She did find us but we got separated. Then we were supposed to meet her, which is why you find us here. We've got to get back to our ship. Our ship's been taken by Wrackshees and all the crew are captives. We went off to find help to repair the ship, so we could rescue them. That's how we met Helga."

Breister and his friends exchanged quizzical looks.

"You're doing what?" Breister asked.

"We're looking for help to repair the ship," Roolo repeated.

"By the Ancient Ones!" Breister laughed. "How on earth is that going to help your mates being—right now as we speak—carried away into slavery? Are you crazy? Whose idea was that? By the Ancient Ones! It will take days to repair your ship and by then your mates will be breaking rock at Tilk Duraow—miles and miles from anywhere you're going to go in a ship! Are you nuts?"

Had Breister's outburst not been filled with laughter and good

spirit, Roolo and Bomper would have melted into the sand in embarrassment. As it was, they managed to exchange sheepish looks and join the laughter.

"I guess that's why neither one of us is Captain," Bomper chuckled.

"And who's the Captain?" Breister inquired.

"Capt'n Red Whale Gumberpott, mate," Bomper said proudly, "and not a better Capt'n on all the seas!"

"And where might this great sea-beast be?" asked Breister.

"We don't rightly know that, mate," Roolo replied. "He and our shipmate, Fishbum, was on night watch and disappeared just as the Wrackshees were attacking the *Daring Dream*—they seems to have vanished. Don't rightly know where they are now."

Breister, shaking his head in wonder, cast a bemused look at his comrades, who were chuckling among themselves.

"So, this great and daring Sea Captain—just so I understand—this great and daring Captain, abandoned his watch at the first sign of trouble and fled?" Breister said with a laugh. "And that might make a beast like myself wonder if there's anyone on your ship fit to be Captain? Let's see, we have four sea-beasts, including the Captain and his mate on watch, all of whom saw an attack coming and all went over the side rather than warn their friends?—Why, it's a crew of mad-beasts!"

"Beggin' your pardon, friend," Bomper said with a hint of edge in his voice, "but Capt'n Gumberpott would never abandon his ship 'n crew—lessin' he thought he could save 'em somehow—that's just the plain truth and I'll be thankin' you do drop the snickering about him!"

"Fairly told, friend," Breister smiled, "I was dashin' to the finish before I had legs to run on—but I'm just a humble carpenter and don't much understand the ways of sea-beasts. No, I just don't do things quite like yourselves! A Wood Cow would never abandon home and friends, and now I see that is your way, too. So, I'll be askin' your friendship and pledgin' mine 'till we rescue your mates. I'll be pleased if you forgive that your ways give me good humor."

"Just hold it a-time, there, Breister," Toshty said. Pointing to the point, not far distant, where the curve of the beach hid the sea beyond, he cried, "Scum-Ralleys comin' ashore! Rummer Boars!"

Breister glanced quickly at the three-masted ship turning around the nearby point and emerging from the trees that had concealed its advance. Flying the Rummer flag—black shark on crimson background—there was little doubt who was coming for a visit. Although he had never encountered them directly, Breister knew about the Rummers. His Cougar friend Annie was from a sea-faring family, and told many stories about the feared freebooters. The "black shark and blood" flag was known to all.

Breister quickly surveyed the situation: open beach, concealment possible only where the forest thickened in the direction of the Rummers, and the only route of escape being the way the he and his friends had reached the beach—a steep open hillside. Breister gave directions: “We gain nothing by fleeing—no time to scale the hill. Let me do the talking and follow my lead. I don’t have a plan yet, but I call on the Ancient Ones for help. If all else should fail, I will use the flicker pole before they can take us captive.”

Within minutes of the ship rounding the point, it had dropped anchor and lowered two longboats. The longboats pulled rapidly up to the beach. A tall, long-tusked Boar, sitting in the prow of the first longboat to touch the beach, was the first Rummer to step ashore. The sea-beast, from his luxurious dress, was obviously the Rummer Boar captain: he wore a heavy black damask waistcoat—black because Rummers’ clothes were traditionally darkened, if not completely blackened by the smoky soot of fires used to roast shark meat; gaudy shark-leather breeches; tall lizard-skin boots reaching half-way up the thigh; an oversized hat with numerous crimson ostrich feathers fluttering in the breeze; a bandoleer of flash gourds; a cutlass and dagger at the belt; and, around his neck, a gold chain hung with dozens of golden shark’s teeth. His authority as Rummer captain, however, was summed up by the Boar’s unusually fearsome curving tusks—which were unnaturally long and sharpened to a point like a dagger.

“I am Sabre Tusk d’Newolf,” the Rummer Captain announced.

Breister saluted the Rummer in a friendly, but not submissive, manner and declared boldly, “I am Breister, Chief of these Beasts of Fortune and I see that you, too, have a quick eye for profit!” He walked to Roolo and Bomper, giving them a quick wink. Then, poking and pinching their muscles, he declared, “I grant you that these two are not great prizes in their physicals. But what is the richest thing you have to trade for what they can tell you?”

A brief jolt of shock shot through Roolo and Bomper as they realized they were pawns in Breister’s deadly game. Stalwart and bold as Captain Gumberpott himself, however, neither sea-beast betrayed fear or surprise. Instead they took up their part of the dangerous gamble.

Roolo suddenly leaped in the keelboat and rummaging frantically, bent down low, seemed to pop something in his mouth, and stood up obviously struggling to swallow something large. Actually, there appeared to be two large objects bulging in his throat, one following the other. Working this mouth and throat, almost gagging and choking, eyes watering with the effort—finally, just as his face began to turn purple and his eyes bugged out, the amazed beasts saw the

large objects that had been bulging in his throat slide down and disappear into his gut!

"Mercy me, mates," Roolo gasped, drawing in a great gulp of air. "The Royal Eyeballs were harder to swallow than I expected!" Taking another deep breath, he continued, "But, if it's riches ya want," Roolo scowled, "that'll show ya that there's more riches than you'll ever want. The Royal Eyeballs I just swallowed are immense, perfectly round diamonds. They are among the largest diamonds in the world, and because of their perfection and the fact each has a blue spot making them look like eyeballs, they are priceless beyond value. Priceless, that is, except to those who want to possess them! Now, I ask ya—how much would the Royal Eyeballs be worth to a fine beast such as yourself?"

Watching Sabre Tusk nearly drooling at the prospect, Roolo continued in a threatening tone, "But unless you treat us all fair and square, we'll never spit a word o' any riches in your direction." Indicating Breister and the others, Roolo continued, "When we met up with these rogues, we didn't trust them and thought at first they might be bandits. So, we hid the Royal Eyeballs—now I've swallowed them and that should furl your sails a bit! But, treat us square and you'll get the Royal Eyeballs soon enough, and what you just saw is my promise I know where there are even richer prizes!" Roolo made this declaration with such convincing passion that even Breister wondered if the statement might be true.

"So you see the bargain we offer," Breister said coolly.

"We are Beasts of Fortune, but not warriors like yourself. We wish to trade you knowledge of immense riches, for the best of what you have right now—a game of chance is what we offer. Are you bold enough to go for great wealth, or only scrabbling after coins in the endless chase for slaves?"

"Riches are, as riches be," Sabre Tusk replied. "What riches do you speak of?"

Bomper, always able to come up with a good story, rose to the challenge. Giving the Rummer a sly look, he said, "What riches, you ask? How about an immense cargo of the rarest snakeskins, bolts of fine embroidered leather, cases of the finest bamboo lace, crates of Crabbee spices and Peskee teas, besides gold and jewels enough to buy several Norder Estates. Not to mention plenty of Slug Beer and Fur-Blaze Sauce to keep your crew happy for a long while—all tucked nicely away, as we knows."

"One fool only I'll deal with—this is between you and me," Sabre Tusk snapped at Roolo darkly. "Why should I give a moment's thought to these lying beasts or that witless bug buzzing away beside you? They're hardly Beasts of Fortune, no matter what they claim—let's

see, for a leader we have barkskin overalls and worker-beast boots, a fearful hammer and saw at the belt, and a twinkle in the eye—Bah! Hardly stuff to raise up worry. Seems to me, I buy you off, you tell me where the riches are, and I take the rest for slaves! Or, you don't like that deal and I just split you open stem to stern and take the Royal Eyeballs and call it good enough."

"Nay!" Roolo said angrily. "Talk that way, you'll never win the grandest prize of all—and you, being the greatest freebooter of them all, would not settle like that—and on that point, I'll stake my wager."

"These beasts are our friends now," Bomper added. "We protect our mates—you treat them as you treat us, or no deal."

"Curse your impudence!" Sabre Tusk snarled. "You're rascals and that's for certain." But the Rummer Boar also stroked his moustache thoughtfully, then stepped forward and squinted at Roolo, then Bomper.

"A trallé for the two of you," Sabre Tusk said, "but nothing for those other bilge-swilling liars—they live to be fools yet another day, but no charity from me."

"Not today!" Breister challenged. "We are Beasts of Fortune, like yourself. Leave us out of gettin' and we might not play nice any longer—it's not the hammers and saws you have to fear, but this!" He picked up a long staff lying at his feet and held it threateningly. "To be fair, I need to even the odds a bit—as a Beast of Fortune yourself, you'll understand the rules of this business. You force my hand and I'll use this flicker pole against you."

"Oh, my—save me from such a fate," Sabre Tusk roared. "He's got a wooden pole and he's going to use it against us!" Looking around at his men, he said, "Show this idiot what we will answer his mighty pole with, lads!" Instantly, drawn swords, dirks, razor-edged boomerangs, and battle-axes appeared on every side.

"Now, as I was saying," Sabre Tusk declared, "Two trallés for the fools who have entertained me—I admire their spirit—for the rest of you 'Beasts of Fortune,' as you call yourselves, the sand that fills your boots as you run out of here with your heads still on."

Turning back to Roolo and Bomper, Sabre Tusk growled menacingly, "Now, I advise you two fools to accept my offer not to split you in half and accept the trallés—but you show me the goods and gold before we pull our cutlasses back from your heads." The Rummer Boar directed two of his crew to position themselves behind Roolo and Bomper, with cutlasses raised above their heads.

"And as for you, Master Sir with the Terror Pole, we'll just take that, if you please." Sabre Tusk was about to direct others in his crew to take the flicker pole from Breister, when a strange clattering and oogling caught everyone's attention.

Glancing up the hillside at the top of the beach, every beast blinked or startled with wonder. Like a fantastic tsunami, an immense moving wave of lizards was flowing over the top of the hill and down toward the beach! Most amazing of all was that a Cow ran at the head of the on-rushing stampede! Although individual lizards were not large, the immense numbers of them made a terrifying sight—especially with the sound of their sharp claws clattering across the rocks on the hillside.

Gooodg-Oog-looo! Oog-Oog-looo! The on-rushing wave of lizards descended in a seemingly endless cascade over the brow of the hill, charging full speed directly at the beasts standing on the beach.

The Rummer Boars, except for Sabre Tusk, did not waste time in retreating to their boats. Running clumsily through the sand, nearly stumbling and falling, Sabre Tusk's crew jumped in their boats and pushed away from shore, leaving their Captain behind. They did not row for the ship, but stopped some yards off shore to see what the lizards would do when they reached water's edge.

Sabre Tusk did not frighten easily and his focus on the promise of riches was not diminished by a few lizards—even tens of thousands of them. Breister, for his part, was nearly speechless—he was certain that his daughter Helga was the Cow running among the stampeding lizards! Found!

Roolo and Bomper, although extremely doubtful about the wisdom of being overrun by thousands of sharp-clawed lizards, remained true to their new-found friend and refused to move until Breister did. Toshty and Annie, of course, being "one for all, and all for all," stood their ground also. So, as the mass of lizards flowed ever closer, the group on the beach remained in place.

When the charging lizard wave hit the beach, however, the stampede suddenly stopped. The lizards scattered and scuttled across the beach in a disorganized fashion, as if each lizard were searching for something in the sand. Slowly the immense faceless herd became, one after another, individual lizards looking for the best possible nesting site. Little by little, each found spots to their liking and began digging out a sandy hollow to lay eggs.

Coming over the brow of the hill, Helga had immediately noticed the beasts standing on the beach, and quickly recognized her father and friends! The joy of that recognition pushed the terror and tension of her recent ordeal to the back of her mind and she put on a new burst of speed as she rushed toward reunion with Breister.

"Helgy! Helgy!" laughed Breister, grabbing his daughter and pulling her close in a joyful embrace.

Sabre Tusk, in spite of himself, had eyes as big as saucers. Roolo and Bomper smiled broadly and Toshty and Annie slapped her on the

back in welcome.

"As I breathe, Helga," Breister said happily, "you certainly made a dramatic entrance!"

"Yea, verily," Helga laughed, "it's been quite a day—started off racing against monitors snapping at my heels, survived a Godgie stampede, and ended up finding you and the others!"

Looking around at the other beasts, Helga's eyes settled on Sabre Tusk. She did not need any help to assess his character. "Who's this Hunky-Junky?" she asked.

"H'yart, there, now," Sabre Tusk snarled, "stop your buzzin' like a pack of flies! There's serious business we're about—I'll just call me crew back and we'll be on with things!"

Sabre Tusk, however, had not counted on a change in heart of his crew who had been floating some yards off shore. With the beach now endlessly covered with lizards, the keelboats began pulling hard toward the ship. Sabre Tusk called for his crew to come back, "Land, you scoundrels! Beach those boats and help me out, you scalawags, or I'll boil your spleens in rum and feed them to you!"

"Nay, Captain! Nay, our dear and worthy Captain!" the call came back from the keelboats. "We see you in no danger—for you, yourself, said you had nothing to fear from those 'fools' and 'so-called Beasts of Fortune' as you named them! So, since we've been plotting for a chance to maroon you these past weeks—seems right to us, to let those as command others like they was lizards, to stay among the lizards! We've elected Saltface as our new captain and we'll be sailing off to better haunts without you!" So saying, they left Sabre Tusk raging on the beach, surrounded by Godgie lizards.

Fuming, but unable to do anything to stop them, for an instant Sabre Tusk simply screamed after his crew, then turned on Breister again.

"You bilge-sucking, lying Cow! You're responsible for this! You and your lizard-loving daughter! You tricked me! I should have known!" With a roar, the Rummer Boar leaped at Breister, knocking him to the sand. As Sabre Tusk hit him, Breister's flicker pole flew from his grasp. Breister rolled once and, pulling his hammer from his belt, bounced back up, facing Sabre Tusk.

"I'll slice you to shark bait," the Rummer Boar cried, slashing his cutlass at Breister.

"Not this time, Rummer-Sum!" Breister returned, parrying away the cutlass blow with his hammer.

Despite Breister's courage, a carpenter's hammer is no match for a heavy cutlass. The enraged Rummer Boar demonstrated why he was known to be a terror in battle. Slashing with a speed that seemed to cut light itself into small bits, Helga could see no way to stop Sabre

Tusk's attack on her father. It was just a matter of time before the much more skilled Rummer Boar would overcome her father. Quickly picking up her father's fallen flicker pole, Helga began to work it furiously. With incredible speed, Helga waved the flexible pole, making the tip a blur of motion above her head. An undulating, whisper-like song sounded across the beach.

"Oh, Ancient Ones, help me, help me please," Helga pleaded silently. Despite the fatigue that made her arms feel heavy and weak, she kept the pole moving furiously. The whisper-like song grew louder. Very soon, a few seabirds fishing off shore changed their direction and headed for the beach. Then, great numbers of birds, appearing from all points of the compass, began gathering in immense flocks wheeling overhead: sea birds, hawks and eagles, sparrows and jays, every kind of bird within miles! Descending en masse, the birds began settling down to roost on every available perch—as near to Helga as possible. Fluttering and flapping, cooing and cawing, chirping and squawking, pecking and pooping—the flocks covered the area around Helga.

Sabre Tusk's attention was no longer on Breister as the immense flock began to descend around him. Instead, he tried to escape. Running as best he could through the vast gathering of lizards, stumbling, tripping, falling, crawling, he scrabbled across the beach like a crab. The immense maze of lizards, however, left hardly a patch of sand to walk on. Soon, the Rummer Boar captain, who had made little progress through the lizards, knelt among the lizards, screaming, weeping, and blubbing like a wild beast. He was rapidly becoming splattered with black, yellow, white, and brown bird droppings.

To Sabre Tusk's disgust and horror, his elegant and dramatic oversized hat was nearly dripping with the slimey, smelly mess—becoming a veritable poop umbrella. Some of the birds who commonly made their livelihoods as pick-pockets and petty thieves, swooped at the Rummer Boar's necklace of golden shark's teeth, quickly picking him clean.

"What a lot of ships!" he cried! "We're being boarded! But let them come and I will squash them between my fingers!" Jumping and leaping at the swooping birds, Sabre Tusk tried in vain to capture them between his thumb and forefinger. Pinching at the wheeling birds as if he could pop them between his fingers like bugs, the Rummer Boar's ranting grew wilder and wilder. "Shim, my mate—turn the wheel to starboard! We're being boarded—turn away, turn! Starboard! Shim! Shim! Are ye deaf? Why don't you turn the wheel? Shim! Where are you? Why don't you answer me?"

But the only answer Sabre Tusk received was a direct hit on the nose from a very sloppy bird dropping. "Yieeeah! I'm hit—" he cried,

falling to his knees and crawling over and among the lizards. The once fierce Rummer Boar, now reduced to the appearance of a filthy wildman, wriggling among the lizards, broke into a crazed, delirious shrieking.

"Oh, darlin's, make room for me, please!" Sabre Tusk wailed, talking to the lizards. "Don't let them poop on me! Help me, protect me hat! They're soiling my feathers! Your kingdom is big and vast! Who is your king? Take me to him to plead my case! I'll serve him forever if his army will protect me against all that poop falling from the sky!" The poor beast, his mind snapped, crawled senselessly among the lizards, stopping here and there to plead his cause.

Getting little response, he turned his elegant damask coat inside out and, pulling it over himself and his precious hat, the insane sea-beast collapsed in a quivering mass, tucked tightly under his coat.

# Helbara Freed

Katteo walked quickly to the Mis'tashe station house and entered, pushing open a heavy oaken door. She was surprised to find the place completely empty! She and Red Whale had understood that their comrades—slaves on their way to Tilk Duraow—were being held at the station. By way of the ruse Katteo and Red Whale had employed, they had succeeded in negotiating the purchase of their comrades with Milky Joe, in exchange for the plundered trallés. The ruse, however, having worked beyond the wildest hopes of Katteo and Red Whale, now seemed to offer the possibility of freeing their comrades without exchange of the valuable trallés!

This happy possibility required that their comrades actually be present at Mis'tashe, however, and Katteo's heart fell as she surveyed the silent station-house. Had Milky Joe double-crossed them? Perhaps they had been lured into a trap and they were the ones who were victims of some grand performance? These doubts and fears rushed through Katteo's mind as she struggled to grasp what had happened to her shipmates—essential parts of their plan!

"Who's there?" came a voice, causing Katteo to startle. Wheeling around rapidly to view the entire room again, Katteo still saw no other creature. "Who's there?" the voice asked again, coming from some unseen point nearby.

Searching more closely with her gaze, Katteo realized that the voice was coming from outside the station-house, the voice filtering in through an open window. Rushing outside, she found a female Wood Cow, with white shaggy hair falling down across her neck and shoulders, chained to the wall by a rusty chain attached to a roughly-made iron collar encircling her neck. She wore a dirty, wide-brimmed had with the brim rolled up tightly on one side.

"Dear beast!" Katteo cried, embracing the prisoner, feeling an immense bond of affection with the unknown captive. "Who are you?" Katteo asked urgently. "Are there others with you?"

"Slow there, friend," the Wood Cow replied, smiling broadly. "I was asking the question first!" she laughed.

"I'm Katteo Jor'Dane, and with Captain Red Whale Gumberpott, we've come to free our comrades from the clutches of Milky Joe and his slavers! But, we'd expected to find them here and I'm troubled of

mind that they seem to be nowhere around."

"Oh, they're here, all right," the Wood Cow said. "I'm Helbara and I make it my business to know everything about the movement of slaves, trallés, and all that nasty business. You knew the route of the trallé caravan you raided, because I passed that information on to the Borf!"

Katteo was stunned. "You mean you—chained to the wall in this remote place—helped the raid we made?"

"Aye," Helbara said proudly. "Why I consider this ring around my neck a certain sort of badge of honor! The more chains they put on me and the more they send me away to distant, unheard of places, the more I know they consider me dangerous to their filthy business! But they can't figure out what I'm doing to them—Ha-Ha-Ha-Ho! They don't see me doing anything and they won't let me talk to anyone, but they sense that somehow I'm the cause of a lot of their caravans being plundered! Ha-Ha-Ha-Ho!"

"That's pretty interesting, Helbara, but you'll have to tell me more later," Katteo interrupted. "We can't count on our success lasting forever—we've got to find out friends and get everyone out of here!"

"The key to my collar is hanging on the wall inside behind the counter," Helbara said. "Release me and I'll lead you to your friends."

As they were talking, Red Whale, his new friends, and their ranting prisoner arrived.

Breister rushed ahead of the others. As soon as he had seen Helbara in the distance, a delicious, electrifying bolt of recognition raced through him. In that moment, the image that had so long so haunted his dreams and life—the remembered beauty and delightful brown eyes of his treasured wife—leaped into the vivid present! The steadiness of mind and solid calmness in emergencies, so characteristic of Breister, failed him completely now. The iron ring around Helbara's neck, the dirty, rusty chains holding her in such a dreadful place—powerless to veil the beautiful spirit and delightful smile—made his eyes swim with tears. He staggered forward the last few steps and embraced his beloved wife, weeping uncontrollably.

"Breister! Breister! Breister!" Hugging Breister close, Helbara happily called his name repeatedly, even as her eyes were fixed on a tall, young Wood Cow standing just behind Breister. The young beast's frame was strong and tall, like Breister, but her large eyes were not the pale blue of her father, but the deep dark brown of her mother.

"Helga!" gasped Helbara, realizing the tall, mature Wood Cow was the daughter she had hidden away in the river to escape Wrackshee bondage ten years earlier!

"Mama!" Helga exclaimed.

In another moment, mother, father, and daughter were locked in

each other's arms, with joy and happiness that cannot be adequately described.

"What have they done to you?" sobbed Breister. "Get her out of these chains!"

"You all know each other!" Red Whale exclaimed, incredulously.

Breister, unable to reply, simply nodded his head from where it nestled over Helbara's shoulder. The ironic contrast of his joyful, tearful face resting against the hard, rough iron collar around Helbara's neck soon ended.

Returning with the key, Katteo handed it to Helga and she released her mother from her long bondage. As the iron ring fell free from Helbara's neck, Red Whale pushed the still ranting Sabre Tusk forward. "There now," Red Whale laughed, "don't let that neck iron go to waste—just clap it around the neck of this here stark, raving mad freebooter!"

*Click-Snap!* As the iron ring clapped around Sabre Tusk's neck, Helbara pulled back from her family's embrace. "My work is not finished here," she said firmly. "There will be much to tell and much to ask later," she said. "But we must free the others and depart from here before trouble comes back our way—which it surely will before long!" Lifting her long-used hat from the peg where it hung, she firmly unrolled the brim as a sign that her bondage was ended, pulled the now full-brimmed hat on her head, and said, "Now we free your mates! But even that will not be easy."

Leading the group to the far side of the station, Helbara pointed to a large wagon parked near the building. "Push that wagon out of the way," she directed. "It is parked there to hide the entrance to the central square where the slaves are kept—your comrades are there."

Toshty, Annie, and Helga fell to the task and rolled the wagon back away from the building. With the wagon removed, a large iron double-door was revealed. Helbara took the key that had opened her iron collar and fitted it to the lock on the door, smiling as the lock clicked open. "They use a single skeleton key for all their locks," she laughed. "Not the best security plan, it seems!"

Helbara's good cheer faded, however, as she gave further instructions to the group. "Have every weapon you carry at the ready—there's no telling what will meet us when I open the door. There is an immense—nay, gigantic—nay, stupendous—monitor lizard guarding the entrance to the central square. As a bit of a joke, they call her Little Puss—though she is large enough to eat a couple of us in a single gulp!"

Slowly opening one of the doors a crack, Helbara peered to the inside. "Yech!" she coughed as a revolting odor exhaled from the passage below. "Oh, by the Ancient Ones!" she said, shaking her head

in disbelief. “The stink of that monitor’s breath makes me woozy!” The presence of an immense monitor just beyond the iron double-doors was unmistakable to all: vicious hissing and snorting, jaws snapping, chains grinding, claws raking across stone, and leather straining under great pressure told the story.

Stepping forward, Red Whale opened the door a crack to get his own intelligence about the beast. The monitor was chained to a stake just inside the doorway, leaving no room to pass without coming within reach of the monitor’s jaws. Obviously fresh and vigorous, the giant lizard, seeing Red Whale peeking at it, moved into classic monitor attack mode. Dropping as close to the ground as possible, the monitor flattened its gigantic head and coiled into a crouching position, gathering itself to rush forward. Watching with a wary eye and flicking its tongue continuously, Little Puss clearly knew her plan better than Red Whale and his friends knew theirs.

“Wait a bit,” Red Whale cautioned, closing the door again. “I have an idea I’d like to explain.”

“It’s clear there’s no hope of moving past that dragon without a fight,” Red Whale began. “She’s determined that we won’t pass her, and there’s no way to our comrades without getting past her. That means, we need the best weapons we can muster—we’ve got to even the terms of battle or we will lose too many of us in the attempt. I won’t waste my crew in a futile struggle.”

All the other beasts agreed, but Helga asked, “So, what do you propose? All the weapons we have are either completely inadequate to defeating such a monster, or require us to go too close in our attack—why she’d rip off our arm before we could get in one lick with a cutlass!”

“That’s right,” Red Whale replied. “But we’ve got another possibility. We’ll send our own monitor down there to battle with Little Puss first, the terms will be uneven, but I think it’s our best chance to at least wear Little Puss down a bit before we take her on.”

Everyone agreed that Red Whale’s suggestion was a good one. But Helga had a question: “How do we know that our monitor will want to attack another monitor twice its size? Seems like the brute’s instinct for self-preservation might argue against that.”

“Aye,” Red Whale agreed, “and that’s why I’ll be ridin’ our monitor steed into battle! I’ll back ’er up a ways and give ’er all the spurrin’ I can to get ’er goin’ fast—then, just before we reach the door, you throw it open, and I’ll ride her straight as an arrow right at Little Puss before she has a chance to skitter. Catch ’em both by surprise—that’s our best chance.”

“But what about you, Red Whale?” all the beasts exclaimed in unison. “You’re makin’ yourself dragon bait!”

“Now don’t you go worryin’ about Captain Gumberpott,” Red Whale replied. “I’m still captain in this here crew and I’ll be makin’ the decisions, and my decision is that I’m the one who’ll be takin’ the chances first—even if this plan works, there’ll still be plenty of chances to take before we’re past that monster. So just furl your sails for a moment—you can charge off into battle very soon—but let’s see if we can soften up the enemy a bit first.”

Walking over to where the monitor steed was tethered, Red Whale patted the faithful lizard on the head and said, “Now don’t take what’s going to happen as if I don’t care for you, ol’ beast—I just need you to take a bit of a chance with me.” Mounting up, Red Whale looked around as his friends and, giving the monitor a deep dig in the flanks, shot forward to meet Little Puss.

Scuttling rapidly across the open area toward the iron doors, Red Whale’s monitor steed was reaching full speed, when Helga and Helbara threw the iron doors open. The monitor suddenly stopped dead in its tracks just at the open doorway, looking straight at Little Puss. Flicking its tongue rapidly, it moved forward slowly. Red Whale, who had been urging his steed on, kicking its flanks, realized that something strange was happening. Little Puss also dropped its battle stance at the sight of the much smaller monitor. Rapidly flicking its tongue, the giant monitor seemed to greet the smaller lizard with what Red Whale could only think of as welcome.

“Crinoo!” Red Whale gasped. “They like each other!” Indeed, the two monitors did like each other. The presence of the smaller monitor seemed to calm Little Puss completely—and soon Red Whale felt able to take a tentative step toward the two monitors. The smaller monitor was now lying on top of Little Puss’s back and both monitors seemed content in each other’s company. Stepping bravely forward, Red Whale cautiously stepped past the two monitors, with neither of the great lizards showing any sign of interest.

# Let the Future Be as It Will

When the Wrackshees had counted the crew taken captive when they boarded the *Daring Dream,* the total did not match the list of the crew found in the ship's logbook. Six of the crew were missing: Red Whale, Fishbum, Katteo Jor'Dane, Roolo Tigg, Bomper Spits, and...also, Bem Madsoor.

When the battle with the Ogress ended and Red Whale told the crew to take a rest, most of the sea-beasts gratefully followed those orders. Bem, however, rather than drop into her hammock like her comrades, crept quietly to the oar-deck and, pushing open an undamaged oar-port, leaned out into the fresh night air. Breathing in great gulps of fresh air, Bem felt as if her head was clearing for the first time in days. Ninety beasts packed into close quarters, condemned to work and live in the same soaked clothing for days on end, sloshing around in ever-more stinking water, created a mind-bending stench. Breathing fresh air at last, Bem relished the opportunity to be alone and clear her mind of the recent hardships. Pushing a broken plank out through the oar-port, she tied it securely so that she could lie on it, hanging outside the ship in the delightful sea breeze.

Lying on her back on the plank, Bem lounged lazily, enjoying the fresh night air, and gazing at the amazing show of stars above. During the crisis of the storm, she had not had time to wonder where the storm might carry *Daring Dream*. Now, however, lying under the stars, Bem realized the ship had been driven a long distance by the wind. As pilot on a Rummer Boar ship she'd gained a solid sense of the relation of sea and land. "Capt'n Gumberpott will take a proper reading and fix our location," she thought, "but it looks like we're not far from Port Newolf." With that thought, Bem flipped over on her stomach, let her arms drop on each side of the plank, and slipped off to sleep.

She had slept only a short time when she awoke with a start, alert in all her senses. Sensing danger, she slowly lifted her head enough to look around. In the early morning dawn, she could make out a ring of kayaks and skiffs around the ship. Stealthy figures were tossing grappling hooks over the sides of the ship and rapidly scuttling up ropes to board. Knowing all the raiders and pirates that cruised these waters, she had no doubt what was happening. Only Wrackshee

raiders used kayaks—*Daring Dream* was being boarded by slavers.

ZING! STRACKKK! An arrow shot past her, gently grazing the side of her head, and stuck in the side of *Daring Dream*. Wrackshee archers, providing cover for the boarding party, had spotted her. Rolling off the plank, Bem dropped into the ocean as additional arrows thudded into the ship around her. Just before hitting the water, Bem took in a deep suck of air and flexed her legs to soften the blow in case she hit the rocks.

SPLASH! Finding that she'd landed where the grounded ship hung clear of the reef, Bem did not surface. Instead, she swam powerfully under the ship to escape targeting by Wrackshee arrows. Clearing the bottom of the ship, Bem continued swimming with all her might, hoping to come up far enough away from the ship to escape notice. Battling against the increasingly urgent need to breathe, Bem continued on, stroke after stroke. At last, lungs bursting, she broke water as quietly as possible, doing all she could to stifle her gasping desire for air.

To her amazed delight, Bem could see that she'd surfaced some few yards behind the ring of Wrackshee boats! The nearest Wrackshee boat was one of the single-sail skiffs. The archers aboard the skiff had their eyes trained on *Daring Dream,* bows at the ready, watching for trouble. Bem carefully surveyed the situation. Two Wrackshees in the skiff. The main attack force of Wrackshees was now all at the ship, grappling up the sides. Bem retreated a bit further away from the nearby skiff to wait, watch, and make a plan.

Within minutes, the surprise attack had been completely successful, and *Daring Dream* was under Wrackshee control. As the catamarans moved toward the ship to allow the prisoners to be loaded, the skiffs stayed in position, continuing to provide cover. The Wrackshee's preoccupation with the loading of the prisoners gave Bem the chance she needed. Once again filling her lungs with air, Bem submerged and swam under water until she was once again in front of the skiff. While still under water, she reversed her direction, then surfaced some yards in front of the skiff.

"How now! Who laughs first?" Bem called out to the surprised archers.

Looking at her with amazement, the archers kept their bows trained on Bem as she swam toward the skiff. As she reached the skiff, Bem could now see that one of the Wrackshees was tall, bald, and had a twisted nose; the other was shorter with long greasy hair.

"I said," Bem called out again, "How now! Who laughs first?—Are ye deaf or don't you know the counter-sign?"

Exchanging puzzled glances, the archers lowered their bows, although keeping them at the ready. "No one laughs at the Five

Friends!" the Wrackshee with the twisted nose replied.

"Ah, good!" Bem laughed as she grabbed the side of the skiff. "A Rummer friend requests permission to board," she said.

"Permission granted," the Wrackshee responded, helping Bem climb into the skiff.

"Where are you from?" the Wrackshee asked. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm a Rummer—captured in a raid and pretending to play along with those scurvy devils to save my skin. I'm sure grateful that the Wrackshee Friends showed up. Those rats would'a bumped me off sooner or later. So, firsts I see the kayaks comin' I skedaddle over the side and come to join you."

"Ya sure d' startle us," the shorter Wrackshee said. "You poppin' up and spoutin' out the Five Friends passwords—I thought you were an apparition—some drowned mate Davy Jones tossed back from his Locker!"

"Nay, I'm naught but meat and bone, like yr'selves!" Bem laughed, happy that her ruse seemed to be working. "I eat n' drink just like any good sea-beast!"

"Oh-Ho!" one of the archers exclaimed. "Now wouldn't it be a pretty thing to have some good food and drink!"

"Har!" the other agreed. "Why we ain't had decent victuals since two days ago. And it'll be another day leasts we see good grub—we're assigned to guard this here ship 'till the Bozz decides whether to fix her or torch her."

"And, mark me words—the Bozz and his gutt-for-brains buddies will eat and drink well tonight, while we sits out here damp and shiverin'. That's a big lot o' slaves they'll be bringin' to to shore today —lots of eatin' fine and drinkin' plenty tonight—for them's as gets to shore that is. Which won't be us."

"Oh, don't be so sure about that," Bem replied. "You say you're on guard duty tonight? You and who else?"

"No one else," the Wrackshee with long greasy hair said. "The Bozz doesn't expect trouble over a wrecked ship, but he's not takin' chances either. We're just going to keep an eye on things."

"And what would ya say if I told you I know where the Capt'n's special grub and drink are stored?" Bem asked slyly.

The Wrackshees' eyes lit up eagerly. "Special grub and drink?" the bald one repeated.

"Oh, aye," Bem responded. "Ya don't think the fine Capt'n eats and drinks like a mere common sea-beast, do ya now? And bein' so, you don't think he just let's any beast know where he keeps his good stuff, now do ya?"

Overjoyed that the Wrackshees seemed to be entirely taken in by

her trickery, Bem spun out a long yarn explaining how it was she knew the whereabouts of the Capt'n's fine victuals. Her detailed description of the delights enjoyed at the Capt'n's table nearly caused the hungry Wrackshees to faint away in ecstasy.

"Nah," the Wrackshee with the twisted nose suddenly said, his smile fading away. "That boarding party over there will pick that ship clean—that's their job. There won't be anything of value left—and they'll eat everything in sight!"

"The Capt'n's fine goods won't be found, you can be sure of that," Bem finished. "Unless you know exactly where it is, you'll never find it. Now, I'm mighty tired," she said, lying down in the bottom of the skiff. "I'm just going to nap a while. When the ship is empty and you're ready to head over there and board it, just wake me up and I'll show you the grub—we'll have a splendid feast tonight! No one else but us invited!"

The Wrackshees contentedly settled back at their posts watching the activities on the *Daring Dream* while Bem pretended to drop off to sleep. Not trusting her companions, however, she only appeared to sleep, wanting only to lie low and stay out of sight from the ship.

Bem carried on with the pretended nap, tossing and turning and mumbling as if sound asleep, until the Wrackshees cried out, "The red banner! It's time!"

One of the Wrackshees, nudging Bem with his foot, said, "Wake up, you lazy varmit! The Bozz's red banner is flying from the ship. That's our signal to move in."

Still not wanting to show herself to the rest of the Wrackshee force, Bem yawned and rolled over, saying sleepily, "That's very pretty—but wake me up when it's time to board."

"If you don't wake then and show us the victuals, we'll show you no mercy," the greasy-haired Wrackshee threatened with a chuckle.

"My mercy'll show nothing but teeth if ya fools mess up our plan," Bem said sternly, through a half-yawn. "Now don't go showin' so much eagerness that ya make yer mates wonder what they might be missing. No—let's just move in slowly. So we board when we know the rest are gone. Now, please let me finish my nap—you've nearly ruined the best rest I've had in weeks."

Waving a small red flag, the Wrackshees in the skiff returned the signal from their comrades departing from the *Daring Dream*. Then, they raised the sail, put the skiff about, and began slowly moving toward the ship.

The last catamaran was just pulling away from the ship, surrounded by an escort of kayaks, as the skiff came alongside *Daring Dream*.

"What prize?" the greasy-haired Wrackshee called to his comrades.

“Bah! Not a gold coin to be found—only a bit of silver here and there, and that mostly in utensils and cups!” one of the departing Wrackshees responded.

“No millions on board this old wreck,” another Wrackshee added. “A good haul in slaves, but beyond that, not even a skinny bone to be found to gnaw on. Biscuit—and that soggy—that’s all we found to eat!”

“Not to worry—you’ll eat well tonight, and sleep snug on shore!” the greasy-haired Wrackshee called out after the departing catamaran. “And thanks to you all for that! Leavin’ us poor seabeasts here in this wreck all by ourselves—with nothin’ to eat but soggy biscuit!”

“Ah, don’t take it bad,” the Wrackshee on the catamaran called back. “Why that skiff of yours has got plenty of fishhooks! HAR-HAR-HAR! And we left you a bag of dried shark meat and a jug of Bummer Bitters! That’ll tide you over ’till tomorrow. HAR-HAR-HAR!”

In two minutes more, the skiff was alongside the ship. Grabbing a boarding rope left dangling, the Wrackshee with the twisted nose sprang up the side of *Daring Dream,* followed by his comrade.

“Here, mate, tie up the skiff and come on up,” the greasy-haired Wrackshee called down to Bem.

Making no effort to catch the rope, Bem instead grabbed an oar and pushed off from the ship. As the skiff floated away, she turned the sail to catch the wind. In a few moments the skiff was moving at good speed away from the *Daring Dream*.

“Treachery! Rogue and rascal! We’ve been tricked!” the Wrackshees roared, flinging curses after the escaping skiff.

“Divide my part of the victuals between ya!” Bem called back. “It’s the least I can do ta return yer hospitality!”

“SLAVE ESCAPING! SLAVE ESCAPING!” the Wrackshees yelled, trying to attract the attention of their comrades in the catamaran.

“Now don’t ya go blamin’ me,” Bem called back. “You’re the ones as went runnin’ off and left the boat to me—and givin’ me your bows and arrows, too! I can’t thank ya enough. Ah, yes, I’m sure the Bozz will be right pleased with two such fine idiots as yourselves!”

At hearing Bem’s last comment, the Wrackshees stopped wailing for help, and the gaze of those on the catamaran was toward the shore, not back to the wrecked ship. Bem, in high spirits at the success of her ruse, set her course away from the ship.

As she watched *Daring Dream* receed into the distance, she turned her thoughts toward what she could do to help its enslaved crew. She knew she could not directly take on the Wrackshees. Needing a plan, she decided the best thing was to sail down the coast for a distance to safeguard her escape and think. Whatever came her way would be whatever came her way. Let her future be as it would be.

# Bem Madsoor In Command

Bigger Black leaned against the rail of the forecastle of the *Lost Hope*, Sabre Tusk d'Newolf's flagship, thinking. The lapping of waves and the sound of a shipmate playing an accordian were the only sounds. A sea chart lay unrolled before him.

"Hey, Big Man, what are you looking at?" It was his messmate, Haf-Tusk.

"Haf, keep it down!" Bigger was deeply annoyed.

"So Sabre Tusk is gone?" Haf-Tusk asked.

"Yeah, he's gone to shore to see what's up with the group he spotted there. But don't you get any ideas—I'm not crossing Sabre Tusk on your account."

"Hey, Big Man, just calm down. I'm not crossing His Tuskiness. Let's just say there's possibilities."

"What possibilities?" Bigger said coldly. "You know I don't want trouble."

"So Bem almost got the job done—" Bigger did not let Haf finish.

"Bem! What about her? Can't we just forget about her? We're lucky the rest of us didn't end up in the ocean like she did."

"Whoa, there, Big Man—you're right. There's no point thinking about what might have been if the mutiny had succeeded. But, interesting isn't it—you have nothing to do with sailing this ship, but here you are studying that sea chart like you're going somewhere."

"O.K.," Bigger answered. "You were almost a hero. But you ended up in irons and just short of His Tuskiness throwing you to the sharks. And, oh, yeah, I almost forgot—you and Bem nearly got the rest of us killed, just for good measure. So, forgive me if I don't too get excited when you have some new idea. But, no way the crew's happy, so—sure—I'm thinking. That doesn't make me crazy enough to follow another hare-brained scheme of yours—but, you got guts and I trust you—what possibilities you got in mind?"

There was a long silence. "We go for it, Big Man. Now. The crew has had it with His Tuskiness—I'm sure they'd go with us if we put the question to them. Sabre Tusk and his goons are on shore. We raise sail and get the blazes out of here."

"I hope you can sail this thing better than I can," Haf-Tusk said. "Sabre Tusk always takes the navigator with him when he goes ashore

—he doesn't want no one thinkin' of leavin' while he's gone."

"Haf!" Bigger Black suddenly exclaimed, "See that skiff off yonder —looks to be headin' toward us. What do you make of it?"

Haf-Tusk took out a small spyglass he kept in his pocket and peered at the skiff. "Take a look!" Haf said, handing the glass to Bigger.

"Bem Madsoor!" Bigger exploded. "She's alive!"

"And likely comin' to avenge herself," Haf added.

"Regardless of why she's comin'," Bigger replied, "it's a powerful, powerful omen!"

"Too dangerous to wait for her," Haf said excitedly. "If His Tuskiness sees a skiff coming to *Lost Hope*, he'll be back here in a flash. Call the crew to us—we act now!"

"What you talkin' quiet and sneaky about up there?" The unexpected question startled Bigger and Haf and they whirled around, instantly on the defensive.

"Just saw you two talking secret-like up here in the fo'castle," Fat-Mouth said. "What's up?"

"Fat," Bigger Black responded, looking relieved, "you startled us—but, that's OK. We were actually just talking about you."

"You were?" Fat replied.

"Sure," Bigger said. "See that skiff out there? The beast in it is Bem Madsoor! She's comin' here to take over the ship—finish the work she started earlier. Now I know you were with her last time—just like Haf and I were. Sure as we're all here together, her comin' back from bein' a dead beast is a sign that the time's run out for Sabre Tusk and his goons. We don't know if Bem's comin' with angels or demons at her back, but a dead beast showin' up is an omen. We say it means take the ship!"

"I'm in," Fat-Mouth responded. "What do you want me to do?"

"You've the biggest talker on the ship," Bigger said with a smile. "We want you to go quick as speedin' cutlass slash to every beast on the ship and tell 'em Bem Madsoor wants them on the main deck double quick."

"That will get their attention," Fat-Mouth chuckled.

"And tell 'em to keep the noise down," Haf added. "We can't give His Tuskiness any hint about what's up."

"Aye!" Fat-Mouth said.

Moving quickly around the ship, Fat-Mouth quickly spread the message. Within minutes, the *Lost Hope* crew filled the main deck, casting astonished looks toward the skiff approaching the ship.

Standing on the steps leading up to the forecastle, Bigger and Haf looked out across their shipmates. Exchanging a determined look, Bigger stepped forward.

"Mates," he began, "Bem Madsoor is returning to the *Lost Hope*.

Whether she's a dead beast come back to life or not we don't know. But she's comin' and she'll be steppin' onto this very deck in a few minutes." Bigger paused, allowing the impact of his words to sink in.

"I say by brain and heart, we owe three cheers to Bem Madsoor! I say we call her Capt'n Madsoor as she comes aboard and pledge our lives and future to her!" He looked around at his mates, seeing the face of each sea-beast take on a look that said, 'AYE!' without saying anything.

Then one sea-beast in the back called out, "THREE CHEERS FOR BEM MADSOOR!"

"THREE CHEERS FOR BEM MADSOOR!" another responded.

"THREE CHEERS FOR BEM MADSOOR!" yet another called.

"Well then, you silly sea-beasts, give the blasted cheers for her!" Bigger yelled.

"HUZZAH-HUZZAH-HUZZAAAUH!" the crew called out in a tumultuous yell.

Within a few minutes, the skiff came alongside, and Bem Madsoor sprang on board. Known to every sea-beast aboard the *Lost Hope*, either by serving together, or by legend, Bem was warmly welcomed. "HUZZAH-HUZZAH! HUZZAH-HUZZAH-HUZZAH!"

Everything was confusion for a few minutes, as the crew surged around Bem. Some, no doubt, wanted to touch her to assure themselves she was a real, living, flesh-and-blood sea-beast. Most, however, merely wanted to congratulate her on her safe return and pledge their loyalty to their new captain.

After taking in the situation and expressing her joy at seeing her shipmates again, Bem calmly gave orders. "Hottin' the briny cup!" she said, calling on the cook to heat up pots of Seafoam Mutter for the crew to enjoy. "The rest of you—up sails, we're leaving immediately."

Turning to one of the youngest sea-beasts, Printy, she asked, "want to take a turn at the wheel and sail us out of here?"

"Yes, Captain!"

"Good! Bring 'er 'round, then keep 'er toward that point of land on the horizon."

"Where're we going, Captain?"

"First, we're leavin' Sabre Tusk to 'is own troubles. He's made 'nough troubles for other beasts—let 'im take it in 'is own chops for awhile. Next, we're goin' to see about helpin' some friends in trouble."

"Who's in trouble, Captain?"

"Well, as I'm seein' it," Bem replied with a smile, "the mates on this ship are rascals as most beasts see's ya. So, there's no goin' to Port Newolf for a rest. First thing's we gotta get you far away to new lands that's not knowin' ya—then, once we's away from here, we'll make some plans. For now, firsts firsts, we spend some time forgettin' about

Sabre Tusk. Set a course that takes us out o' sight of Port Newolf—then, before dark we'll cut back in down the coast a piece. I want to check over the ship for a long voyage—then we'll set off for far horizons."

"Aye, Capt'n!"

# A Memorable Feast

The long column of escapees from Mis'tashe and their liberators marched haphazardly through lengthening shadows cast by the mountains as the sun began its decent. The mountains, however, were not high and forbidding, but more like a staircase descending to some yet invisible landing. No one among the troop of beasts was familiar with the landscape or knew exactly where they were heading. The most seasoned beasts in the group had decided that it was best to simply escape by the most obvious route as rapidly as possible, hoping for the best.

"By the Ancients!" Helga exclaimed as she walked along, "that was a near miss!"

"What's amiss?" Christer asked.

"Ayeeiii! Christer!" Helga snorted in disgust. "Are you not conscious of how narrowly we've escaped? Why, with you and that *Darin' Dream* crew makin' silly and loud as brainless twits, it's a miracle we're not already back in chains! Don't you know you were runnin' around and hollerin' at the top of your lungs—and there's Captain Gumberpott and the rest who had a lick of good sense, tryin' to make you hear and get us all safely away from Mis'tashe, while you were callin' attention to us like hammer and gongs! I swear, if the Creation depended on the likes of you for smarts, we'd be about equal to worms guzzlin' dirt!"

Christer, walking beside Helga, turned his face toward her and, with wide eyes nearly overflowing with fake tears, wailed sorrowfully, "My mouth! My mouth! I've sunk into my mouth and can't get out! Save me! Oh, Miss Scold-Me-Again, please save me! I'm jabberin' and can't stop!" Breaking into laughter, Christer gave Helga a playful punch in the arm.

"Will you hush up!" Helga fumed. "Don't you understand we're still in danger?"

"Oh, okay," Christer replied with a smile. "I do understand—it's just so hard not to want to tease you. You're so pretty when you're unpleasant."

"Was that supposed to be a compliment?" Helga said, looking at Christer with raised eyebrows. "If it was, it's a bit like being told, 'I don't notice your smelly feet because your looks make up for them!'"

Christer, realizing he's pushed his teasing about as far as was wise, scratched his chin and thought a moment. Then he said, "You're absolutely right, Helga. I'll be quiet, just like I was near death and not likely to recover. It'll not tease, nor tempt you to be unpleasant—for a few minutes or so. How's that? Better?"

Sighing, Helga looked at her friend and shook her head. "Chister, Christer, Christer, what am I going to do with you? Here we are struggling through the mountains, hoping against hope to stay out of the way of Wrackshees, Rummer Boars, and whatever else Milky Joe will likely be sendin' after us, and all you can do is tease me?"

"Correction," Christer replied with a grin, "all I want to do is tease you! I could stop if I wanted."

"Are you sure about that?" Helga replied. "I think you're naturally silly."

"Have a little—" Christer began.

"Patience?" Helga completed the sentence.

"You aren't ever gonna be patient while your friends are in danger," Christer said with a chuckle. "It's like you've got this urgency to help beasts in trouble that—well, like you just can't quit on it 'till it's done—about like when you gotta take a leak and nothing else will do until it's complete."

"Christer!" Helga exclaimed. "Do you have no good manners either? And besides, I know you well enough now to think that you're really about as urgent about getting everyone out of this mess as I am."

"Yes," he said. "It's only walkin' along mile after mile, and thinkin' how much fun it is to be with you, that gets me actin' like such a perfect fool sometimes. What I'd be doin' if you weren't here is walk along, thinkin' and worryin' about what I can do next when I can't do nothin' right now—so that just leads to me walkin' along, kickin' rocks, and wearin' out my boots for no good reason."

"Oh, never mind," Helga laughed. "I know you're basically a decent beast and I'd probably be walking along kicking rocks, too, if you weren't here pestering me!"

"The sea!" Red Whale called, sending the message back down the line. The troop of beasts was advancing along a dry stream bed which cut deeply among the mountains. For those back along the line, there was nothing to see for several hundred feet except the same old rocks and trees. But for Red Whale and the beasts near the front of the column, the view widened out, revealing what was surely the Great Sea sparkling in the rich glow of early evening.

The pace of the weary beasts picked up as those in the front rushed to find their way down to the sea and those at the rear pushed forward to gain their first glimpse of the discovery. As more and more

of the seacoast became visible, a long sandy beach came into view.

At first, in the deepening shadows of dusk, the beach appeared empty. But Red Whale, lumbering along at the head of the line of beasts, seemed to make out some faint movement on the still-distant shoreline—not unlike beasts coming ashore in a longboat!

"Crinoo! Zarr!" Red Whale cursed. "Rummer Boars again! Could our luck be any worse?"

Keeping his thoughts to himself for the moment, Red Whale motioned for the column to stop. Still providing no explanation, Red Whale directed his comrades to take a rest, while he continued his advance toward the beach to take a look. Red Whale wanted to investigate the nature of the beasts coming ashore while his comrades were still far up the mountainside and able to easily retreat if a threat existed. He did not have long to wait for more information.

A light, like the faint strike of a match, flashed on the beach, setting a torch ablaze. The brilliant light of the torch revealed a dozen Rummer Boars walking up the beach from their longboat.

"HALLOOO!" Red Whale cried out loudly, causing a great startle and stir among his comrades resting some distance behind.

"HALLOOO! OVER HERE, BEM MADSOOR! HALLLOOOO!" Red Whale yelled. For, indeed, it was none other than Bem Madsoor leading the Rummer Boars on the beach.

A mass of beasts surged toward Red Whale from behind, as everyone quickened the pace down toward the beach. Nearly a mob by the time their feet hit the sand, the happy beasts whooped and hollered on all sides. The *Daring Dream* crew rejoiced to be reunited with Bem Madsoor and jabbered endless questions about how she came to be captain of a Rummer Boar ship. For their part, the crew of the *Lost Hope* followed their captain and took part in the general celebrating. Helga, Christer, and the others, always glad to join a hearty welcome for new friends gave slaps on the back and broad smiles all around.

"These beasts must be hungry and thirsty," Bem said. "And I've got seabeasts back on the ship who are surely wondering what is going on! Let me signal them to come ashore and bring provisions for a feast!"

The memorable feast given by Bem Madsoor on the beach that night sealed the friendship of many beasts and clans so long separated by the vast Voi-Nil and previously unknown to one another. From the personal stores of His (former) Tuskiness, Sabre Tusk d'Newolf, Bem and her crew served Red Whale's crew previously unknown delicacies:

Lizard Patties in Tambon't
Crabee Shark Knuckles with Crabee Broth

Puree of Honey-Wolloper
Broiled Pears and Whisker Grass
Fresh-Caught, Roast Salmon, Bathed in Butter
A Whole Shark, Larded on the Spit
Lizard Steaks or Baked Snake
Pickled Eels
Snake Egg Pie
Sweet –Tweet Cake
Twice Shot-Through Creams
Hot Peskee Tea

There was much to celebrate. The *Daring Dream* crew was safely reunited and voted to abandon the wreckage of the *Daring Dream* in favor of accepting an offer from the *Lost Hope* crew to come aboard their much larger vessel as shipmates. To the loud cheers of both crews, Red Whale and Bem Madsoor proposed a voyage back to Lord Farseeker's realms, returning the *Daring Dream* crew home and fulfilling Lord Farseeker's hopes of learning what lay beyond the Voi-Nil. Red Whale assured Bem and her crew that the good Lord Farseeker would have many a voyage to keep them sailing. Cries of "HUZZAH-HUZZAH-HUZZAH" from both crews accepted Bem and Red Whale's proposal to serve as Co-Captains for the voyage home. Signaling the end of Sabre Tusk d'Newolf's raiding, his Rummer raiders' new policy of honest sailing and fair dealing toward all, and the exchange of lost hope for new dreams among his crew, the name of Bem's new flagship became *Daring Dream II*.

For their part, Helga and her parents rejoiced in the end of their long separation, and enjoyed their many new friends. In particular, Helbara and Breister observed the new friendship between Helga and Christer with their own happy smiles, seeing in the young beast's faces a look of affection that they well understood. The happiness of their family's reunion, however, also emphasized the continuing absence of Emil. There would be no comfortable settling into a new home until her son was reunited with them.

Facing this uncertain future, the Wood Cows were glad for BorMane's promise to provide them company and help. The brave and worldly-wise old Coyote, deciding at last to retire from the sea, pledged to remain with the Wood Cow clan wherever they went.

"But first we have to visit the Rounds," Helga reminded her parents. "I want us all to know Elbin and Sareth and all the rest of my 'other' family!" Anticipating the joyous welcome that Helga would receive on her return to the Rounds, Toshty insisted that such a special occasion should be shared by Helga and her parents alone. It was agreed that BorMane and Christer would first accompany Toshty

and Annie to Toshty's cabin, before going on to meet the others in the Rounds.

To everyone's delight that evening, BorMane said farewell to his sea-faring days by telling endless stories about his travels and adventures. Entertaining and full of adventure, the stories proved to everyone's satisfaction that the world was one globe, with a single immense sea beckoning all beasts to find one another. Red Whale, memorizing BorMane's stories as he heard them yet again, was confident that he was bringing back more than enough information for Lord Farseeker to offset the loss of *Daring Dream*—plus the even grander *Daring Dream II* and its worthy captain and crew.

With a starry night sky blazing above the happy feast and the ship's band playing, there was little reason to wonder about the fate of other characters that had played a role in bringing all these beasts together.

It would not be fair, however, to end this account without paying some attention to a lone figure who, some days later, hurried along a twisted old road leading up into the mountains not far from Norder Crossings. The narrow, abandoned pathway, unused since a more direct route was built, passed through an ugly and forsaken land of badly eroded slopes, scraggly bushes, and dark, muddy streams. Scattered here and there, small, dirty houses fell down into piles of rubble, their past inhabitants fleeing long ago to more prosperous areas.

Colonel Snart's disguise fit well with these surroundings: A rough filthy cloak, pulled tight around his neck, had a large hood hanging far forward over his head, completely hiding his face. Wearing cheap traveler's boots and threadbare cotton pants and shirt, a common peddler's satchel hung from his shoulder. He made his way along the rough track, muttering to himself.

"Ha! Nobody interested in a poor old peddler, more ragged than the riff-raff I send off to Tilk Duraow! And this old road can't take a proper wagon anymore, and the land's ruined, so no one likes to be comin' up here. Ha! Why, I can just slip into one of these tottering old houses and lie low just as long as I like."

Keeping on a bit longer, the Monopole finally picked out a collapsing house with its fallen chimney nearly blocking the door, and climbed over the piles of rubble to get inside. "Ha! Just the sort of perfect neglect and decay that I need for my temporary abode! Not a beast anywhere that would likely take interest in a place like this. Looking with approval at the filthy, broken windows and nearly destroyed roof, the Colonel chuckled with pleasure, "The rains are over so don't need a good roof—and the more wrecked the place is, the less likely I'll have company coming to visit. I could probably live here for years and no one would notice. Yes, this place is perfect."

Alas for the Colonel, however, he was overheard by a young Wolf working behind the house. It was, in fact, the very Wolf cursed by the Monopole a few days before in Norder Crossings! Hearing the Colonel's words, the young Wolf thought, with a glow of good humor, of his encounter with the Monopole a few days earlier. He had heard that things had not gone well for Colonel Snart since that time. Outraged Norder Crossings merchants, ruined by the loss of the caravan to the Godgie Stomp, had forced the Monopole to flee in order to save his skin. Not satisfied to run the Monopole of Caravans out of Norder Crossings, the merchants had hired a Wild-Vile Cat bounty hunter and two Skull Buzzards to hunt the Monopole down and return him for punishment. Rumor had it that the slave traders in Port Newolf also were so furious over the Monopole's recent role in the loss of a large and valuable lot of slaves that they were also after the Colonel with torches and swords. Even the High One was whispered to have denounced his brother over the losses he had caused. The young Wolf instantly understood why the Monopole might be traveling in abandoned country seeking a place to hide out.

Quickly forming a plan in his mind, the Wolf stuck his head through a rear window of the house and said, "Well, well, dear Colonel, what brings you out to my place? I don't get much company, so having you show up, why, I'm astonished at the honor you pay me!"

Falling backward in surprise, Colonel Snart stammered out a reply: "Why, no, dear beast! You've got the wrong beast! You've made a mistake! I'm a simple peddler, new to the area, whose trying to find his way across the mountains. I was just stopping a moment to rest and then I'll be on my way—don't mean to trouble you at all."

"Why, it's sure enough Colonel Snart," the young Wolf replied with a laugh. "Would it be possible that I'd mistake him? Do you really think so? Why, such a picture I have of you nearly getting snip-snap-gulped by that monitor a few days ago! Why, how would I forget such a figure as that—even not considering the unkind words the Colonel spoke against me! No, I don't reckon I'm mistaken who my visitor is!"

"Then you're a fool in full flower!" the Monopole replied. "And a rude, disgusting clod to boot!"

"Not I," the Wolf replied with a smile. "I'm a farmer, but I have nothing to do with flowers. I raise clover and honeybees—trying to bring these hills back to life. And, if you'd look, I'm rebuilding this house you complain at so wildly. Land and house are abandoned and free—which doesn't look foolish to me."

"I still call you an empty-brained slug!" the Monopole snarled, picking up his pack to leave.

"Well," the Wolf replied, "since you aren't Colonel Snart, let's go

back to where I came in and try again. I don't want us to part with bad feelings. That's not the way my Memm taught me to be towards strangers."

"Bah! Just let me out of here!" the Monopole said. "I've got a long way to go and the best thing you could do is just to let me get going on my way."

"Be my guest," the Wolf replied, "I'm certainly not holdin' you up. But, my Memm would want me to offer you a kindly suggestion—a bit of apology for mistakin' you for someone else."

"Bah! So what's the grand wisdom you want to give me?"

"Just that you'll save yourself a cold overnight in the mountains if you take the shortcut through Haz'ben Gulch—that's the trail following that creek just up ahead there. Take the trail left, follow the creek, and your journey through the mountains will be done faster than you expected."

Without saying more, Colonel Snart threw his satchel over his shoulder, climbed back out of the ruined house, and walked off down the road.

The young Wolf watched as the Colonel walked down the road. Seeing that the Monopole took his suggestion and turned down the path at Haz'ben Gulch, a broad smile spread across his face. Returning to his work, he muttered happily to himself.

"Right sorry, Memm, if I was not completely honest with that fellow. You taught me right, and I did make a kindly suggestion to a 'lost traveler,' as you'd want. I really was truthful that taking the shortcut down the Gulch would shorten his journey and avoid a cold night in the mountains. Now, yes, that is because I knew he'd be nabbed by the bounty hunter—but, nevertheless, I was truthful in the strict sense of things. Why, I wasn't required to tell him that the Wild-Vile Cat and the Skull Buzzards were here looking for him a while ago—or that I sent them down there to set up camp along the creek. They was already figurin' he might be comin' up this way—and, well, it is a nice place to camp. And, bless you, Memm, I also just figured that you really would want me to introduce that fellow to the bounty hunter. Seems like something you'd have wanted. Now, I think I'd better get on with my work, Memm, before I start imagining the tracker beasts jumping the Colonel and then him later up there breaking rock at Tilk Duraow. That would be too much fun on a day when there's work to be done!"

# Epilogue

As the Sweet Ice bowls emptied on the evening of Helga's return to the Rounds, not a single Roundie was absent. Sharing the Sweet Ice together expressed the soul of the Roundie community, and on this special night that spirit was especially strong.

A gentle evening breeze rustled through the cottonwood leaves as the Roundies settled down in happy, full-bellied contentment to listen to Holy Speak storytellers, as was traditional on occasions of great import. The Gather Round itself seemed too constraining for such a joyous occasion, and the storytelling occurred in the cottonwood grove just beyond the Commons. As the Roundies gathered, Ayatama Cornnello played her little accordion and began to sing while Rostom, her brother, played his fiddle. The happy music seemed to send sparkling ripples across the Deep Springs River, echoing off the hills; then falling into silence when Bernice Saysoso, the most elder Holy Speak storyteller at the Rounds, stood up and raised her hand.

"Dear friends," she began, "as the last sunlight gleams from the far side of the hills, leaving us for another day, we gather to honor our own spark of light that has returned to us. Helga, who left the Rounds some years ago as an apprentice carpenter, has returned—this time with her parents—and tonight we celebrate her presence once more among us.

"Some might say that the story Helga has to tell is too fantastic to be true. Let us rely on our own ancient wisdom and draw what assurance we seek from it. The spirit of *The All* within each of us can discern a truthful account of things we did not previously know how to hear. This is the teaching of the Holy Speak and the belief of the ancient generations...What if our dear Helga has found something new? What if? This is the story we have for you tonight."

Amidst the deepening shadows, cedar oil lamps were lit and cast a soft yellow light across the expectant crowd. Many questions lay hidden within Helga's mind and heart as she prepared to speak. Where to begin? How to tell a story that had so many beginnings?

As the children to gather around her, Helga picked up Alvo Merrybuck, a wee Prairie Dog babe. "Mampy-Helg!" Alvo wailed loudly, "Start at the beginning! Tell about how you came to the Roundies! Start there!"

Giving the little Prairie Dog a ruffle on the head, Helga smiled, “Not this time, Alvo, that will have to be another day...But you’ll like what I’ve got to tell tonight, anyway. Do you like explosions? And Grizzly Bear trackers going after bandits?” Helga winked at Toshty and Annie who were seated together at the front of the crowd.

“Ooooo! Yes!” Alvo squealed. “Tell about that!” Helga held the little babe close. “Well, you little scamp, if you would just quiet down a bit so a body could talk...Why, I’ll get started!”

Turning to the assembled Roundies, and casting a fond look toward Helbara, Breister, Christer, and BorMane, Helga began her tale. Stooping to pick up some sand, she let the grains sift back to the ground in a falling stream of particles catching firelight. “Stories are like that sparkling rain of sand,” she began. “There are many stories and I don’t know them all. Tonight I only have time to tell you a few —like the few grains of sand that remain behind, clinging to me.”

## Special Feature: Caravan Dragons

The *Wood Cow Chronicles* include several kinds of Dragons in the storyline. The most common type, the RingaGelani, is introduced in the first volume, and appears in every other volume in the series.

**Caravan Dragons: The RingaGelani**

Coloration: Photoactive coloring. Green over most of the body in sunshine, with color changing to blue-green in less intense light. Deep blue eyes.

Caravan Dragons are capable of sustaining respectable, but not blistering, speeds over long distances, while pulling heavy loads. There are several Dragon species that combine these characteristics, but the RingaGelani is the one most commonly found in caravan service.

The RingaGelani is more a steady work-dragon than a flashy speedster. Towing up to thirty times its own weight in caravan wagons almost effortlessly, this high-powered Dragon is versatile, reliable, and

nearly indestructible. It has been known to survive avalanches, lightning strikes, tornados, and forest fires with only minor scratches. Except in cases where the caravan was disabled by broken wheels or similar delays, no caravan pulled by RingaGelanis has ever arrived late at a destination.

The power of a RingaGelani as a caravan Dragon is obvious as soon as the wagons are hitched up. It's not a high-speed hot-clawing beast, but it can still rip from standing still to top speed in under ten seconds. Put a team of perfectly matched RingaGelanis at the front of a caravan on anything like a decent road and they'll deliver the most fragile cargo in perfect condition, on time, every time.

Like most of the other caravan Dragons, with a RingaGelani, great performance isn't the same thing as great manners. Extremely ill-tempered and rebellious, these Dragons snarl and hiss so much that it leaves uninitiated passengers numb with fright. If they've been fed a steady diet of shark meat—which they intensely dislike—they're prone to snap at anyone getting too near. Since shark meat is cheap, the common practice of Dragon Bosses is to make it the standard ration for caravan Dragons. Yet the mix of bad temperament and poor food makes for an uneasy relationship between RingaGelanis and their masters.

In short, the RingaGelani is powerful, fast enough, and probably the only Dragon that will scare the pants off of you just by the way it looks at you. That, and the fact that a team of these beasts makes enough racket—the rumbling in their throats is the worst—to make your body vibrate. But you've got to love these hard-working caravan Dragons. Being strong enough to pull a caravan through an avalanche doesn't come without costs. If you're going to die anyway, why not drive a high-powered team of bad-attitude RingaGelanis like a maniac over some of the worst roads you can find? It's an adrenaline rush no hot-clawing Dragon can provide. Trust in this: the RingaGelanis will get the caravan there, even if you don't make it.

# Special Feature: The Maggon Dragon

As has long been known, scientifically speaking, the Maggon Dragon is not a species of Dragon, but rather, something entirely different. More closely related to crocodiles than to actual Dragons, the Maggon has no close physical relationship to Dragons, and none of the social and cultural habits that generally characterize Dragons.

Having now made that clarification, let us move to BorMane's account. Some years after his encounter with the Maggon Dragon, BorMane, in response to persistent requests, told the complete story of his actions on that day. The following is an account of BorMane's words, as reported in the Norder Bay newspaper of the day.

> The Maggon was a Dragon more likely to catch and eat beasts that tried to trap it, than the reverse. Its massive size, and greater strength, were generally enough to keep it safe from hunters. The Maggon's amazing taste, however, and delectable aroma as it sizzled on the grill, made the dangerous challenge hard to resist. Especially for sea-beasts who lived most of their lives on "sea-beasts' snot" as they called ship's galley food, the peril of going after the great lizard seemed but an added thrill. So it was that when Sabre Tusk d'Newolf brought his ship to anchor off of Maggon's Island, and went ashore with his crew, we accidentally discovered the culinary wonders of the Maggon.
>
> When we landed on Maggon's Island, Sabre Tush dispatched work groups to refill water casks, gather fruit, and hunt for game. It had been a long time since we had seen any food that looked appetizing, and we were almost delirious with excitement at the thought of fresh food, especially meat. I was put in charge of the party sent to replenish our water supplies. Finding a creek flowing down, we followed it upstream for a distance seeking the sweet springs that fed it. For its part, the hunting party set off in a generally similar direction.
>
> The hunting party was moving very quietly through the deep woods, when they caught sight of brush moving ahead of them where the woods opened into a clearing along a creek.

Approaching cautiously, their steps froze when they glimpsed a gigantic lizard-like creature resting on the wide bank of the creek. Stretched out to its full length—perhaps fifty feet—the creature seemed to be resting. The lower body of the massive beast was covered with streaks of red mud, as if it had run quickly through muddy ground, giving its normally bright yellow skin a striped look.

As they stood gaping at the beast, it opened its mouth and spit out a gooey glob of crushed bones and fur, apparently the remains of a recent snack. Three rows of sharp teeth glistened in the sunlight. Although the beast was at rest, when it swished its tail, the movement was blindingly fast—a blur. Lifting a foot, the beast lazily picked its teeth clean with its claws. The sickle-shaped claws clearly could slice a beast open with a single swipe.

"I'm telling you, Strummer," GutCheck, one of the sea-beasts, whispered in an urgent tone. "I know Sabre Tusk put you in charge of this expedition, so I'm respectfully askin' to be excused from duty—I'm happy eatin' fruit, 'specially if it means I'm not walkin' around missin' arms and legs."

Before Strummer could reply, the beast suddenly lifted its head, dark red eyes darting here and there.

"It senses danger," Strummer whispered.

He had barely completed his words, when the beast bounded into the brush lightning-fast.

Stunned at the speed of the massive beast's movement, Strummer and his comrades exchanged glances of concern. They now understood the dangers of the hunt—perhaps they were now the hunted.

"All right," GutCheck growled in a low voice, "I hope we're satisfied—we've got a fifty-foot lizzy-monster out there, that's quicker than anything I've ever seen, and we've no idea where it is."

"It's no safer goin' back, than it is finishin' the job," Strummer replied, pulling his machete out of its holster. "Come on, it's ten against one."

GutCheck gave Strummer a disgusted look. "More like eighty against ten, if you ask me," he said, "and armed better than we are."

They moved on another thirty yards or so, pushing carefully through dense vegetation, every nerve tingling. Then they saw brush moving, as if blown by a powerful wind. A moment later there was a crashing noise, mingled with splashing mud and water. Though it was invisible, there was no doubt that the Maggon was nearby.

Cold, clammy sweat trickled down Strummer's neck as his head slowly swiveled, trying to locate the monster. Then, his eyes froze. The huge creature was reared up on its hind legs, towering above their heads, its long wet body glistening where shafts of sun touched it. Watching in weird fascination, Strummer's eyes watched the green leaves shimmering against the monster's yellow body.

The Maggon opened its mouth, revealing the rows of razor-sharp teeth. It was clearly preparing to attack. Seeing that Strummer, in the lead, was in extreme danger, GutCheck gave a ferocious cry and leaped forward, swinging his machete.

There was a mad rush, a vicious howling, and GutCheck was thrown hard to the ground. But no jaws were clapped on him, and no claws ripped at him. The action was elsewhere. Racing and thrashing in every direction, the Maggon was matched in a fight to the death that neither GutCheck nor Strummer were part of. Raging and struggling through the grass and brush, the monstrous lizard ran here and there, trying to knock off a Coyote who was firmly fastened to its back!

"BorMane!" GutCheck howled, for indeed it was me.

I had heard the trouble developing and gone to investigate. When I came upon the situation, I saw that desperate action was necessary, and I leaped on the Dragon's neck, locking my legs around it. With my free paws, I desperately tried to plunge my harpoon into the beast. No matter how the Dragon thrashed and struggled, he couldn't throw me off, but his lightning-fast movement made it difficult to land a blow.

Savage hissing and snapping continued for many minutes, as the Dragon lashed its body and ran hither-thither through the brush. Now the struggle was hidden, now it burst into sight, as Strummer and the others tried to attack the creature. The Maggon's fantastic leaping and thrashing, however, made it even harder for those on the ground to land a telling blow, than for me, firmly planted, as I waw, on the beast's back. As the minutes went by, it became clear that the Dragon's potent weapons of tooth and claw were useless against me—indeed, at times, I was almost laughing at the wild ride I was taking. Even if I couldn't land a killing blow with my harpoon, by simply hanging on tightly, I was gradually wearing the frenzied monster down.

The huge beast continued to thrash through the tall grass and trees, but its speed was now only half what it had once been. Then it came to a stop, quivering and gasping for breath. Keeping my grasp grimly around the monster's neck, I bided by time, while my adversary lashed his head, vainly snapping the air with his vicious

teeth. Racing off into the brush again, the Maggon hissed and thrashed. Then the monster screamed, the brush crackled and snapped, and all was quiet.

Strummer, GutCheck, and the others dashed into the bush, and found me standing beside the dead Maggon, breathing hard. My harpoon was buried deep in the ear of the creature.

"You sure arrived in a nick of time," Strummer said gratefully. "I thought you were supposed to be filling the water casks!"

"We were down the creek doing exactly that," BorMane replied, "but it sounded like you all were in a spot of trouble, so I came to investigate. When I got here, looked more like that beastie was fixing to make lunch of you."

"Well, on that cheery note," GutCheck grinned, "let's figure out how to get this carcass back to the beach. Looks like it'll make a great feast!"

"We'll need help," I told him, "it's more than we can handle."

"You stay here," Strummer offered, "I'll go to the beach and bring more of the crew to help."

Within an hour, Strummer returned with a two dozen more sea-beasts laughing and guffawing with a tremendous noise. When the news of what had happened reached the rest of the crew, so many beasts wanted to help haul the carcass back, that lots were cast for the honor. It was one of those times when hoots, hollers, and general riot sound like an odd sort of music.

"There we go, you famished sea-beasts!" I laughed, as the Maggon carcass was raised into the air, and began to move through the brush.

When we reached the beach, a huge pit was dug in the side of a clayey bank and filled it with stones. In no time a roaring fire was burning in the pit. When it had turned to embers, and the stones glowed red, we hung the Maggon's carcass from poles just above the pit, with layers of seaweed and bark piled on it. For the rest of the day, the massive chuck of meat roasted slowly in the heat and smoke, and the various scavenging parties contributed what they had found.

The ship's cook brought out the Sticker Pickles and Guacamole Mollet that had been gathered, and Saber Tusk allowed three day's ration of Sweeter's Fiery Zest to be distributed. Such gigantic pots of Wild Salty Rice were never boiled before, nor had any beast seen such platters of Creamed Pineapple and Sweet Potatoes. The Pelting Balls, pulled from the river, broiled, and served on beds of coconut, were perhaps the best of it, except for some kind of broth that no one would own or identify, that was delicious with the Maggon meat.

But the roasted Maggon was the star of the feast. With a wonder-producing smell potent enough to make the strongest beast faint with joy, the meat tasted like the world's best runny cheesecake spiced with something indescribable. The indescribable part depended on your taste. If you liked it, it was like raspberries soaked in honey-lemon. Those who hated it, claimed it tasted like sweaty socks filled with mushy onions. Truth be known, virtually every beast loved the Maggon. And, as special acknowledgement of its role in the feast, I was given a piece of the Maggon's tail.

# Notes

[←1]

A full account of Helga's return to O'Fallon's Bluff is provided in Volume Two of the Wood Cow Chronicles.

[←2]

The traditional fare of unemployed sailors.

[←3]

Prevailing favorable winds.

[←4]

Narrows End Bay term for a ferocious storm.

[←5]

A sea-beast known for exploits of great bravery.